“Just the two of us, you and me.”

Aesthetics and Economics of Intimacy in Contemporary American Fiction

Dissertation

zur Erlangung des Grades eines Doktors der Philosophie

an der Graduiertenschule für Nordamerikastudien (John-F.-Kennedy-Institut)

am Fachbereich Philosophie und Geisteswissenschaften

der Freien Universität Berlin

Vorgelegt von:

Fabian Eggers
Berlin 2023

Erstgutachter: Prof. Dr. James Dorson

Zweigutachterin: Prof. Dr. Ulla Haselstein

Tag der Disputation: 05.06.2023

“Just the two of us, you and me.” – Aesthetics and Economics of Intimacy in Contemporary American Fiction

Table of Contents

"The ability of each intimate to be a full presence with the other bespeaks a reciprocity between them so fundamental that it need only be hinted at by the barest of looks, smiles, or intonations of voice in order to be immediately and unmistakably grasped."

Warren Wilner. "Philosophical Approaches to Interpersonal Intimacy."

"Solitude felt in the presence of the other is somehow constitutive of intimacy."

Nancy Yousef. *Romantic Intimacy*.

Acknowledgments

I express my deep gratitude to my three advisors James Dorson, Ulla Haselstein and Sabine Schülting for wholeheartedly supporting me throughout this project. James Dorson inspired me to pursue this dissertation long before I actually conceived of it, for his engaging master's seminars and encouraging feedback for my master's thesis sowed the intellectual seeds for the present study. In addition to introducing me to a very useful methodological toolbox, his careful readings of drafts, thoughtful responses and suggestions of secondary literature have proven invaluable. Ulla Haselstein has provided me with equally important feedback in all stages of this project. Her questions, recommendations and advice have helped me strengthen my argument, justify my selection of texts and position my work within the Americanist field. Last but not least, I am grateful to Sabine Schülting, whose attentive readings, critical responses and constant encouragement were vital for this project.

Both the John F. Kennedy Institute's literature colloquium as well as the research colloquium at the Institute for English Philology at Freie Universität Berlin have been enormously helpful forums for me. I would like to thank all master's and doctoral students, postdocs and professors involved, for they made sure that these intimate circles were intellectually stimulating even in the high times of the pandemic. Many thanks also to my fellow doctoral candidates of the 2018 cohort. Moreover, I have had the privilege to present parts of this work at the 2019 Spring Academy of the Heidelberg Center for American Studies as well as the 2020 Ruhr PhD Forum in American Studies and would like to thank my respective audiences for supportive responses and suggestions that have helped me to develop my project further.

Thanks to the unconditional support of Alan Liu, I was able to enjoy a stay as a visiting researcher at the University of California, Santa Barbara in late 2021. Besides being an inspiring scholar, Alan proved to be a very accommodating host, who made sure that my time in southern California was productive and enriching.

Thank you very much to the kind souls of the Graduate School of North American Studies, David, Gabi, Kian and Katie, for endless help with logistics, administrative and website matters as well as for being available even when stays abroad make for large time differences. In addition, I thank Solveig and her editorial eagle eyes.

Thank you, finally, to my intimates Harriet, Leon & Hannah.

1. Introduction: Alone Together

Since its rapid spread in early 2020, the novel corona virus has had severe effects on human relations and, years into the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the airborne pathogen still compels people to keep their distance. Manifest in both routine precautions—"stay six feet apart!"—as well as the burdens caused by the succession of quarantine, isolation, and general lockdown, maintaining a safe distance remains the pandemic's guiding principle. But when digital technology creates unforeseen intimacies for coworkers, families and cohabitants by cutting through the public-private binary in near real-time, staying in touch does not require bodily contact and distance does not equate separation. At least for those whose job or education became remote, isolation coincided with connection, they were *alone together*. Readers of a recent strand of American fiction may be familiar with this peculiar form of mediated intimacy.

As a technology well suited for parasocial interaction, literature not only speaks to these contradictions of shared loneliness; sometimes it can alleviate them. When a dedicated reader immerses herself in a text, she can exchange her physical surrounding with the fictional world developed in the book in her hands. In this sense, literature does not only communicate between consciousnesses, it can share and even allow the reader to shape them. In addition to the sense of involuntary deceleration that compelled people to read in the spring of 2020, it might thus have been literature's connecting capacity that led to its reappraisal in times of scarce human encounter. Classics of world-literature were suddenly in demand, reading clubs mushroomed (albeit online), and pestilence fiction was devoured in search for insights into how to cope with a pandemic.

Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* was published about two years before the pandemic, yet in these unusual times it was quickly recognized as essential lockdown literature and discussed in "Corona Book Clubs" (O'Neill). After all, the nameless protagonist of Moshfegh's darkly humored novel voluntarily self-isolates for an entire year. As a child of two uncaring parents, she intuits early on that "it was better to be alone than to be stuck with people who were supposed to love you, yet couldn't" (64), a pessimistic maxim on social relations guiding her entire life. When both her parents die sometime later and the protagonist finds herself a full orphan in her twenties at the turn of the millennium, she decides to circumvent her grief with the help of a cornucopia of pharmaceuticals and a self-prescribed "hibernation" (7). At first, her life "collided into one gray, monotonous plane ride through the clouds" (84). Later on, her idiosyncratic quest to

withdraw from society and isolate "herself towards wellness" involves drug-induced comas for days on end (Moshfegh, "Lockdown").

Isolation is not exclusive to *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, for the "miserable ensemble of drunks and dropouts, misfits and murderers, pervs and pill-heads" populating Moshfegh's fictional oeuvre consists almost entirely of "loners," but the novel's uncanny timing made her "the unofficial laureate of lockdown" (Allardice). While this "prophecy gone very wrong" (Moshfegh, "Lockdown") justifiably guides much thinking about the novel, less attention has been paid to its foregrounding of the economics that frame both the personal lockdown at the novel's center as well as the real one it inadvertently anticipated. For the protagonist might come from an emotionally impoverished family, but she is not "worried about money." Unlike the "young Egyptians" who work at the local "Bodega that never close[s]" and reliably replenish her stocks, the main character can afford not to go out. Her "dead father's financial advisor" takes care of her "investments" and inherited real estate, she receives regular "unemployment" and has "plenty of money in [her] savings account" (1–4). "I was born into privilege […] I am not going to squander that" (265). Whereas her material wealth enables the protagonist's solipsism (Dirschauer 61), the novel suggests that her withdrawal is in turn necessitated by a thoroughly materialistic and estranging society (Wynne).

After reemerging from her hibernation, the protagonist thinks of herself as "healed enough" to rejoin social life (137). Yet *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*'s ending on 11 September 2001 as well as the main character's unsettling detachment from the day's events indicate a severe disconnect from anyone but herself. Moshfegh's book, on the one hand, conveys a longing for intersubjective intimacy precisely because the main character's quest to negate it (though understandable in context) ends in a pharmaceutically induced delusion. On the other hand, it accentuates the links between ambivalent intimacies and the material conditions that enable one to pursue or deny them. This applies both to fictional characters and, through intimacy as one of literature's affordances, to a perceived connection among reader, text and author. It is this very intersection between emotional and economic spheres in a prominent strand of recent American literature that this dissertation investigates as the "aesthetics and economics of intimacy."

1.1. Thesis: Negotiating Intimacy

This study examines contemporary American fiction that expresses a notable yearning for intimacy while simultaneously reflecting on the various economic circumstances that complicate its fulfillment. Through what this dissertation calls the "aesthetics and economics of intimacy," authors of a considerable stylistic range deliberate questions of subjecthood, interiority and the difficulty of interpersonal reciprocity with renewed urgency. The literature of David Foster Wallace, Jennifer Egan, Tao Lin and Barbara Browning studied in the following ponders questions of irony and sincerity—the rhetorical cousins of distance and intimacy—and explores how to form genuine relations in a society that simultaneously mandated disintegration as well as connectivity long before a global health crisis has brought this inherent contradiction to a head. While these texts are neither manuals for pandemics, nor necessarily focus on digital communication (though some do), they nevertheless illuminate the paradox of intimacy and distance outlined above. By shedding light on how material relations bring such dilemmas to a head, the primary literature examined by this study warrants an analysis of intimacy's frequently overlooked economic context.

Fiction does not merely respond to a stable cultural reality when considering if and how intimacy can thrive in the contemporary moment; literature does not exhaust itself by respectively affirming or subverting existing orders (be they social or discursive), it can itself generate, stabilize, or deconstruct them. In this vein, the chosen texts incorporate, reflect, and at times, challenge theories about social relations, specifically those popularized by postmodern philosophy. In an instance of reflexivity to be explored in detail, the fiction at the heart of this study has grown skeptical about postmodernism's skepticism, specifically with regards to notions of stable human subjects and reliable communication. In marked contrast to postmodernism's playful detachment, the selected texts take an affirmative stance toward intersubjectivity and evince an ethical commitment to earnest exchanges within and through literature. This belief in language's connecting abilities is not naïve: an awareness for the difficulty of establishing heartfelt connections in a highly fragmented society is palpable throughout. Crucially, however, the fiction under consideration here holds that such relationships are not only possible but indispensable for human life. While their characters may well (and frequently do) fail in their attempts at intimacy, the texts perform gestures of outreach themselves, so that it is ultimately up to the reader to decide whether to reciprocate.

The fiction studied here, moreover, recognizes that unlike its conceptual predecessor romance, "the chief example in our culture of what is natural, uncontested, obvious" (Shumway 2), intimacy is a reflexive and ongoing process in need of permanent attention. Although the literature at the center of this dissertation is frequently informed by debates in the social sciences, it does not merely cast this knowledge into a literary mold. Instead, it participates in the conversation in its own registers: As will be discussed throughout this dissertation, the selected primary texts qualify as the kind of "critical fiction" not only aware of current debates in criticism but articulating standpoints of their own (Timmer 23). One intersection between fiction and theory of interest for this study is how this literature resonates with the sociological discourse on a recently pervasive rhetoric of care. Given the palpable affinity between the explicit communicative emphasis of the concerned texts and capitalistic demands in a period shaped by paradigms of self-rationalization, this study does not accept sincerity and similar affective gestures performed in and by these texts as ahistorical sentiments. Rather, it analyzes the prominent re-emergence of such expressions both against the backdrop of post-Fordism's emphasis on communication, flexibilization and perpetual adaptation as well as intimacy's discursive history. Furthermore, it demonstrates fiction's ability to negotiate such transformations on both societal and individual scales.

The aims and consequences of these negotiations remain open for each selected text. On the one hand, the contemporary craving for intimacy participates in the American tradition of antimodernism by seeking individual mitigation from the social burdens that induce such escapism in the first place. On the other hand, this study shows that some fiction can, through its extensive meditation on the estranging state of social relations, encourage the very reflection antimodernist thought eschews. At times, literature can even prompt the reader's imagination on how to change these relations. In short, the cultural work of the recent literary turn to intimacy remains ambivalent. In adherence to this ambivalence, this study does not classify the selected texts as either autonomous or determined but treats each as a literary producer of economic knowledge, a notion expanded upon in the following.

1.2. Method & Chapter Overview

This dissertation examines how the described longing for intimacy—how a perceived connection between characters, but also between reader, text and author—expresses itself in and through literary aesthetics. In provisional modern usage, "aesthetics" refers to art's formal capacity to stimulate, for example, the beholder's imagination, fantasy, pleasure or recognition—to create, in other words, an overall sensuous experience (Barck et al. 309). This understanding of what "counts as aesthetic" (Weinstein and Looby 4) indicates that, given that its focus lies elsewhere, this study sidesteps the sprawling debate about aesthetics' semantic diffusion (Barck et al. 394). In turn, as the titular equivalence of "aesthetics" and "economics" signals, it does not conform with the formalist impulse to *only* consider the written word in close readings. The chosen texts are the primary objects of analysis, yet this dissertation makes sense of literature by also reflecting on the various cultural and social forces impinging on it, that is, by thinking about literature's context, be it large as social form and the economy or comparably small as writing trends or authorial self-staging. In more concrete terms, this study's focus on the material conditions that make intimacy (im)possible align it with the "New Economic Criticism" or the "economic humanities," as it has been recently renamed to point to an interdisciplinary footing (Woodmansee and Osteen; Crosthwaite et al.).[1]

The field of (new) economic criticism remains multifaceted both in scope and method (Cuonz), but its common denominator is central for this study: to historicize and hence demystify economic knowledge through the study of (literary) aesthetics. This means to examine how the analyzed texts elucidate links between the emotional and the economic and if these links help to understand why "the utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy" are so often disappointed in daily life (Berlant, "Intimacy" 282). In other words, this study investigates how the selected primary texts convey "literary knowledge of economy" (16), Christopher Newfield's phrase referring to fiction's ability to chart the incommensurabilities and aporias of life under contemporary capitalism without explaining them away in the mode of either sleek criticism or apologetic vindication. Precisely because literature creates plausible worlds in which the kind of dilemmas plaguing (not only) contemporary intimacy are painfully obvious yet "neither resolved

[1] First on the rise in the 1980s during the era of neoliberalization, this school of thought has an inverse relationship to the economic cycle and is reliably in demand during and after economic crises and experienced its most recent upsurge of contributions in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (e.g. Shonkwiler and La Berge; Clune).

nor analyzed" (23), it can prompt reflections on this impasse—and how to get out of it. These kinds of insights expose the value of studying intimacy's economic context.

As will be discussed below (section 2.1.1), an investigation of intimacy traverses many discourses and entails a dialogue with various approaches. Despite its grounding in (new) economic criticism, this study therefore engages with a range of scholarship from the humanities and the social sciences. The sociology of emotional labor (Hochschild, *Managed*), emotional norms in general (Illouz, *Saving*) and at work in particular (Mills; Gregg, *Work;* Sennett, *Culture*) as well as more recent accounts of individualization (Bröckling; Reckwitz) all inform this dissertation. Conversely, some sections draw from *The Turn to Affect* (Clough and Halley), particularly the strand interested in how affect can stabilize and reproduce social structures (Röttger-Rössler and Slaby). Elsewhere, this dissertation discusses the work of scholars interested in the explicit and implicit ways that seemingly external paradigms influence fiction of the present day. In the spirit of economic criticism, this outside influences will frequently concern the material conditions of characters and places, writers and publishers that the selected texts address or efface (Seybold and Chihara; Brouillette, *Literature*). Yet the focus will at times also shift to literature's institutional framework, which scholars such as Amy Hungerford and Mark McGurl perceive to be under the continuing hegemony of educational institutions. However, both observe a sprawling of "alternative institutions" that challenge conventional relations between writers, editors and publishers by embracing digital technology and incentivizing readers to actively shape their reading experience (Hungerford, *Making* 41). A similar activation of the reader, albeit scholarly, is at the heart of postcritique, a recent methodological intervention in literary studies that will be discussed with respect to its striking affinity to the kind of literature studied here.

But what designates this "kind of literature"? The selected texts—Wallace's *The Pale King*, Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Lin's *Taipei* and Browning's *The Gift*—share some fundamental characteristics in that they pair formal innovation with a general adherence to a realist code and characters "who seem like real people" (R. G. Smith, "Six" 186). In different ways, all texts value their respective audience, attesting to the fact that much of the literary turn to intimacy hinges on gestures of connection which will emerge in readings of the texts themselves as well as of authorial statements. The selected fiction lends itself to economic criticism in that it negotiates these interpersonal longings amidst the threat of material scarcity, perhaps an unsurprising theme

for self-reflexive literature published in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent Great Recession. None of the books can compete with bestselling genre fiction or self-help books on intimacy, but all four authors have furthermore proven themselves in the literary market by way of commercial success (Lin), prestigious publishers or prizes (Browning) or both at once (Egan and Wallace). Even if market success is thus not necessarily synonymous with high book sales, the four texts were chosen in part because they indicate the tangible cultural impact of the contemporary yearning for intimacy. Despite these commonalities, however, their stylistic differences remain considerable. The four texts circumscribe a scale from middle toward highbrow literary fiction (in the order of Lin, Egan, Browning and Wallace) and, given that each demands a distinct interpretive approach, the corresponding chapters draw from different sources of theory and criticism. Starting with the foundational theory sections, the subsequent overview introduces the chapters chronologically and summarizes their respective analytical focus.

Following this introduction, chapter 2 lays this study's theoretical and terminological groundwork, contextualizes it in the current post-Fordist constellation and offers a first analysis of larger trends in recent fiction and literary studies. Section 2.1 delineates the ambivalence of rupture and continuity between recent American writers and their (postmodernist) ancestors, an ambivalence which Mary K. Holland calls "succeeding postmodernism." It then clarifies two of this study's essential concepts, "intimacy" and "contemporary." The former is notoriously fuzzy and has been debated by a whole host of scholars in various disciplines. Accordingly, section 2.1.1 provides a survey of scholarship of intimacy, discusses it as a reflexive and historically contingent notion and discusses its affinities to the history of antimodernism. Section 2.1.2 then argues that this study's primary texts are "contemporary"—an equally complex concept—not by way of arbitrary time markers but because in different ways, they all express a distinct interest in their environment: the United States in the late 20th and early 21st century. After these essential abstractions, section 2.2 discusses two short examples that illustrate the yearning for intimacy (when it is not negated, as in Moshfegh) before placing it in a literary history ranging from the 19th century psychological novel to more recent innovations of the "New Sincerity" (Kelly). Section 2.3 draws on the sociology of reflexive modernity to contextualize the understanding of intimacy *as work* on display in this fiction as part of post-Fordist transformations.

The subsequent sections turn to postcritique and relate this young, yet prominent school of thought and its aim to rethink critique to these very societal transformations. Postcritique not only shares New Sincerity's trusting language, it equally bespeaks antimodernist sentiments. As will be shown, an analysis of these like-minded intellectual strands helps to map the cultural development this study traces on a larger scale. Much like the literature examined by this dissertation, present-day methodological trends are understood as indicative of their historical period rather than as autonomous developments (R. G. Smith, "Six" 182). Following the introductory section 2.4.1 on an influential polemic by science and technology scholar Bruno Latour, section 2.4.2 turns to the works of Rita Felski and her suggestion to exchange the methodological gesture of distrust with affecting forms of reading that grant the individual more agency. Section 2.4.3 discusses a third example in Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus' "Surface Reading," which similarly questions the usefulness of symptomatic reading. After a short investigation into the historical predecessors of the postcritical debate in section 2.4.4, the chapter concludes by discussing New Sincerity's and postcritique's considerable similarities: As section 2.5 demonstrates, both share a rhetoric of reciprocal trust between author, text and reader. Their respective reassessments of the reading process favor affective accessibility over distance and detachment. Both are part of the "reparative turn" and hold that only in shared intimacy can reader and text become creative partners. This way of thinking about literature evokes flat hierarchies, flexible approaches and a division of (hermeneutic) labor. It is not coincidentally reminiscent of the mentalities demanded from today's capitalist ideal types (Boltanski and Chiapello; Sennett, *Culture*) and signifies an attempt to revalorize both literature and literary criticism under the contemporary conditions of post-Fordism.

Chapter 3, "'Quality Time' with David: *The Pale King*'s Emotional Economy," is the first of four literary case studies. Wallace's campaign against his postmodernist predecessors and the lasting appreciation bestowed on him as the innovator of New Sincerity writing necessitates a critical analysis of his fiction in the context of this study's scope—and *The Pale King*, his posthumously published novel of 2011, proves particularly productive. The fragmentary text is often read as an insightful commentary on the wide-ranging economic and ideological changes felt in the post-Fordist workplace throughout the 1980s, as a text whose deliberation of bureaucracy, civic virtue, and concrete labor may defy the contemporary capitalist emphasis on flexibility. Yet its interest in the *emotional* complications arising from this process has often been overlooked. Chapter 3 therefore brings two disconnected strands of Wallace Studies into dialogue by combining

an analysis of the novel's underlying emotional economy with a historicization of Wallace's programmatic sincerity (section 3.1). With one important exception to be discussed in section 3.3, *The Pale King*'s characters appear vulnerable and relatable precisely because their communicative skills are deficient; their flaws produce sincerity (section 3.2). *The Pale King*'s similarly heartfelt authorial persona mandates his readers to labor through the incoherent and difficult text and, in exchange, evokes intimacy by compassionately addressing his readership's anxieties about an increasingly contingent labor market. Ultimately, *The Pale King* speaks to the intersubjective complexities of its readers' daily lives and offers respite through narrative "quality time" (section 3.4). This perspective, firstly, helps to explore the affinities between Wallace's writing and post-Fordist management techniques and, secondly, to contextualize its remarkable commercial success and critical acclaim.

"Networking and its Discontents in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*," the fourth chapter, considers a text from 2010 whose formal idiosyncrasy provoked many critics to debate it with reference to both established and more recent literary forms. Section 4.1 conversely shows that the notion of the (narrative) network is best suited to encompass the text's varying themes and sprawling shape. Egan utilizes the network form to probe numerous surprising convergences among characters, times and places. *Goon Squad*'s skillfully layered exploration of the network's bilateral relations to technology, sociality and (failed) intersubjectivity was greeted with critical acclaim and, for the purposes of this study, offers a productive site for the analysis of intimacy as a reflexive and ongoing process. Egan's text pays attention to how the characteristic complexity of networks overwhelms virtually all of her characters, many of whom follow escapist inclinations to flee the present moment and retreat to intimacies of the past or future (sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.2). Crucially, *Goon Squad*'s appropriation of the network exceeds the digital context and stimulates reflections about the relational and interdependent sociality under contemporary capitalism that Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello call "connexionism" (section 4.4.1). Engaging the age of "network culture," Egan's fiction also calls attention to the readers' own networked condition in an increasingly connective world by demanding the text's playful appropriation (section 4.4.2). *Goon Squad* performatively deliberates a nostalgia for an analog world, but it does not merely long for an innocent past. Instead, it ultimately inspires an imagination of a future beyond network culture's double binds, a future of sustainable intimacy (section 4.5).

Chapter 5 probes the "Poetics of Indifference in Tao Lin's *Taipei*" by first discussing Lin's career, which is representative for a generation of self-made online writers. An early champion of the "alt-lit" community and an unrelenting self-promoter, Lin has successfully placed his markedly affectless literature in mainstream publishing. *Taipei* offers an idiosyncratic example of how a strand of younger writers negotiates the interpersonal, it enriches this study's understanding of intimacy by closely associating it with the book's guiding theme of cost-benefit analyses in both form and content. Section 5.1 discusses this distinct lack of emotion, the omnipresence of drugs and an all-pervading sense of estrangement to be the counterintuitive prerequisite for intimacy within his prose. Given that Paul, Lin's alter-ego within *Taipei*, is a barely veiled version of the author, the text moreover makes claims of authenticity by alluding to the genre of autofiction. Yet in line with Lin's de-romanticization of creative labor, *Taipei* does not evoke autofiction to explore the potentials of a highly subjectivized literature, but simply as a genre in high demand on the book market (section 5.2). Rather than a commercially canny writer, section 5.3 argues, Lin should be viewed as an entrepreneur who happens to write. This perspective illuminates why the supposed autofiction is dominated by activities that would appear secondary to the act of writing. The subsequent section 5.4 discusses the apparent contradiction between Paul's entrepreneurialism and his severe social phobias. With the help of Rahel Jaeggi's update of the time-honored notion of alienation, Paul can be understood not as withdrawn, but as maintaining "relations of relationlessness." The chapter's concluding section 5.5 contends that this peculiar form of inconsequential association not only guides the lives and intimacies of the book's characters but is also a shared experience for many of Lin's readers. Paradoxically, *Taipei*'s strength ultimately lies in its refusal to mean anything, an absence of consequence intimately familiar to a sizeable part of his readership.

Chapter 6, "Collaboration for 'something else' in Barbara Browning's *The Gift*," concludes the analytical part with an examination of a novel that explicates its own fascination with intimacy. Whereas the palpable interest in intimacy and its contemporary obstacles on display in the texts by Wallace, Egan and Lin still requires interpretive work, *The Gift*'s metafictional proclivity to explain itself involves the reader from the very start in its exploration of "inappropriate intimacy" and invites a postcritical approach. For the author's autofictional stand-in, Barbara Andersen, this phrase not only connotes thrilling intersubjective opportunities. In her peculiarly optimistic understanding of gift economics, it also holds the key to large-scale economic transformations she

desires (section 6.1). Andersen's pseudo-revolutionary project goes nowhere, but her personal setbacks are not the end of the story. *The Gift* subjectivizes critical theory by testing it in the personal realm (section 6.2 explores "fictocriticism" in detail) and presents itself as an open-ended work in need of readerly appropriation. The same logic of appropriation extends to the book's corporeal understanding of intimacy, even when it is digitally mediated. Andersen's self-consciously naïve attempt at establishing a gift economy might succeed, but section 6.3 highlights that in line with Browning's belief in the performative capacity of the novel, the reader is tasked with carrying on the collaborative experiment. As the chapter's concluding section 6.4 shows, however, *The Gift*'s publishing environment reveals significant blind spots to Browning's enthusiasm, for her own literature depends on 'gifts' from the very corporate sphere she supposedly seeks to abolish. Although this study thus declines *The Gift*'s postcritical offer, the novel nevertheless helpfully widens the range of contemporary fiction's negotiations of intimacy to include self-consciously performative fiction.

Given the continuing skepticism intimacy faces in most socially conscious scholarship, the closing chapter 7 on the "Compromise(d) Intimacy" deliberates the political implications of contemporary fiction's desire for intimacy. While such suspicion remains well-founded with regards to the wider reparative turn in the academy, the conclusion argues that literature can work around the "tyrannies of intimacy" (Sennett, *Fall* 337) exactly by making plausible to its readers the inseparability between the intimate and the social.

2. Intimacy in Contemporary American Literature and Literary Studies

> As the traditions become progressively diluted, the promises of relationships grow. Everything that has been lost is suddenly being sought in the other.
>
> Ulrich Beck. *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity*.

2.1. Succeeding Postmodernism

Numerous scholars have noted that influential contemporary American writers perceive the propositions of postmodern schools of thought, specifically poststructuralism and deconstruction, as exceedingly antihumanist.[2] In their view, these theories tend to overlook "that some of the goals and beliefs of humanism remain worthy and in fact crucial to the continued production of art and literature, and perhaps even to our continued humanity" (Holland, *Succeeding* 4). Language plays a central role in this re-evaluation of how ethics and aesthetics converge in literature. In contrast to the postmodern skepticism toward its ability to connect and mediate, Holland observes, these writers approach language as a tool rather than a problem (3). Robert L. McLaughlin makes a similar observation:

> many of the fiction writers who have come on the scene since the late 1980s seem to be responding to the perceived dead end of postmodernism, a dead end that has been reached because of postmodernism's detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of nonreferential language (55).

Although he appreciates the implicit "social purpose" in this project, McLaughlin perceives a simplified view on the solipsistic tendencies of literary postmodernists who, despite "their immersion into the luxury of language […] care deeply about the world" (59). This judgement evokes a central statement of Thomas Pynchon's *V*: "Love with your mouth shut, help without breaking your ass or publicizing it: keep cool, but care" (406). Tore Rye Andersen makes a similar point: "If postmodernism was a hall of mirrors, it was a very ethical hall of mirrors where many of the themes and aesthetic strategies that are so important to Wallace's generation were already present" (17). The disregard for such postmodern sincerity indicates, true to Wallace's self-

[2] Antihumanism refers here to those theories gaining importance from the 1960s onward that challenged the then dominant liberal humanism and exerted considerable influence in English departments across the United States for the subsequent decades. For a discussion of the specifically Anglo-American traits of this development, especially its inherent "structural misunderstanding," see François Cusset's study on *French Theory* in the United States (xiv).

proclaimed patricide of his postmodernist predecessors (McCaffery 146), that a rhetoric of renewal, often hardly distinguishable from marketing claims, is as important to the "post-postmodern" project as marked stylistic shifts in the literature itself.

Such is the essential ambivalence between continuity and rupture for a literature that seeks to break away from a prominent strand of postmodernism while carrying on some of its tenets.[3] For Holland, the contradictory endeavor of overcoming the contradictions of (one variant of) postmodernism through its own means has come to fruition for some contemporary novelists in recent decades. In her view, writers now move from "struggle" to "success" in employing antihumanist means toward humanist ends (2). What she calls "poststructural realism" (7) does not exhibit a simplistic attitude disregarding the insights of poststructural theory altogether or relying on narrative techniques unaware of language's precarious condition. Instead, the writers in question absorb and reflect, but also challenge poststructural notions by, for example, insisting on language's indispensability for the kinds of connections constitutive for intimacy. The apparent paradox of "language as solution to the problem of language" is an accurate account of their literary endeavor (3) and reflects the pun inherent in her study *Succeeding Postmodernism*. The corresponding texts thus do not regress to prelapsarian literary modes, but revisit humanism's contradictions in their present-day complexity (6).

Scholars ponder what such fiction contributes to contemporary theory and, moreover, what ethical implications such a renewed trust in language's relational capacity entails. Nicoline Timmer, for example, understands such texts as "critical fiction" (23): a kind of literature not only informed by recent critical theory but reflecting on its conceptual problems. Intimacy functions as both a means and an end in this intervention characterized by "the emphatic expression of feelings and sentiments, a drive toward inter-subjective connection and communication" (13). Her notable optimism is representative for the scholarly view on this literary development, yet before turning to the ways in which intimacy surfaces in recent literature and scholarship and why it is often greeted enthusiastically, some terminological explanation is in order.

---

[3] Given the simultaneity of various postmodernisms, McGurl's classification of "technomodernism" helps to delimit the scope of the intervention examined here. Although Wallace et al. indiscriminately went after a vaguely defined "postmodernism," they did not take issue with, for example, the focus on (ethnic) identity on display in the "high cultural pluralism" of Toni Morrison or Philip Roth (McGurl, *Program* 37–63). Furthermore, this dialectical development is not exclusive to fiction and analogous observations have been made for American Poetry (Swensen xvii–xxvi; Burt).

2.1.1. (The Cultural Work of) Intimacy

Deriving from the Latin *intimus* for "most inner," intimacy "refers both to what is closely held and personal and to what is deeply shared with others." As such, literary scholar Nancy Yousef explains, it "designates the sphere of the inmost, of the private, and also the realm of cherished connection and association" (1). The inherent tension between the intention to treasure, but also to relate the very thing treasured, makes intimacy a productively contradictory concept. For Yousef, it attests to

> a confidence that individuals can and do disclose to one another thoughts, feelings, and experiences, but it also pertains to, and thus intimates the foreboding or wish for, an inward region of irreducible privacy, a fated or perhaps willed withholding. In the habitual confluence of these conflicting convictions, ethical aspirations and epistemological anxieties are always intermingled (1).

By highlighting the "tension between sharing and enclosing[,]" intimacy distinguishes itself from other "imaginations of relational possibilities" such as the 18th-century notion of "sympathy" or the psychoanalytical understanding of "empathy" (1–2). In contrast to sympathy, for example, intimacy neither requires similitude nor relational symmetry; mutuality and reciprocity are likewise no prerequisite. What intimacy does involve is "*the experience of another's wholeness,* whether the other is physically present or not" (Wilner 22, original emphasis), and a perceived proximity, however fleeting it may be. Yet proximity alone does not suffice: Much like one does not have to be alone to feel lonely, Yousef cautions that a sense of togetherness on its own does not constitute intimacy. "As mere proximity, intimacy is without content: whatever comes to turn bare proximity into intimacy, into the feeling or sense of closeness, is left to be determined" by each individual text (3). For her, the unbreachable gap between the innermost, that which must remain unrelatable, and the intimacy one does (want to) share amounts to the "paradox of intimacy." The following will clarify that this dilemma is informed by a simplistic notion of subjectivity that proclaims an untenable binary between the "inner" and the "outer" self. Such conceptual problems aside, Yousef helps to frame fiction's relationship to intimacy, for she claims that literature may be able to alleviate the "paradox of intimacy's" punitive consequences, "soften[ing] the hard opposing edges of solitary inwardness and interpersonal exposure as to make intelligible the notion" that one lives "alone and yet in the presence of the other. […] Whether this being-alone-together can be understood as holding relational possibilities that include, rather than evade, an ethics of recognition" remains, again, a question to be probed in each single case (4). For writer Stacey D'Erasmo, this question of success or failure hinges on the "kind of textual atmosphere" that effects

intimacy in fiction: "the textual *where*" of the characters' meeting "actually produces not only opportunities for intimacy, but also the actual sense of intimacy. That odd and powerful space between, the space where we meet, isn't only the medium for intimacy: it is, sometimes, the thing itself" (D'Erasmo 11–12, original emphasis).

Given the inherent ambivalence of the "odd and powerful space between[,]" intimacy traverses all kinds of discourses and can be found in intellectual, social, and legal debates as well as medicine, architecture and in aesthetic thought. Having many connotations, intimacy/intimate knows no single but numerous antonyms, such as public, distant, political, strange, large and foreign (Streisand, "Intimität/intim" 176–77; vol. 4). Its various linguistic counterparts indicate both intimacy's relational potential as well as its conceptual fuzziness. Social scientists have studied trends and patterns in intimate *practices* for some time: Changes to intimacy in cohabitation (Raley), family and relationships (Laumann et al.; Cancian), in care or sex (work) (Parreñas and Boris; Hochschild, *Commercialization;* Ehrenreich and Hochschild) have all been subject to scholarly debate. However, to *theorize* intimacy remains difficult, for that means "formulating a highly subjective experience in objective terms" (Wilner 21). Niklas Luhmann aptly declared that "we have still not designed a theoretical concept to deal with the subject [of intimacy] adequately" (157), a declaration that makes Lauren Berlant's quip that "virtually no one knows how to do intimacy" appear just about true ("Intimacy" 282).

As the eminent cultural studies scholar on this "special issue," Berlant has made lasting contributions to the understanding of intimacy in the fields of queer and affect theory. "To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity." In an emphasis on duality not unlike Yousef's, she continues: "But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way" (281). Berlant's trilogy on "national sentimentality" (*The Anatomy of National Fantasy, The Queen of America goes to Washington City* and *The Female Complaint*), traces how intimate genres such as melodrama shape the experience of citizenship particularly for American (white) middle class women. As the mode of "identifying across difference with another's pain" (Stuelke 26), sentimentality for Berlant signifies a promise of political solidarity, for example when slave narratives allow a minority subject to inform "the

dominant culture about life in the crevices of national existence" (*Queen* 245). However, the promise of solidarity is betrayed all too often when

> the ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a passive and vaguely civic-minded ideal of compassion. The political as a place of acts oriented toward publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gestures projected out as an intimate public of private individuals inhabiting their own affective changes (*Female* 41).

Since it always defers its utopian resolve in favor of yet more melodrama, sentimentality necessarily remains *Unfinished Business*, as the subtitle to *The Female Complaint* puts it. The same logic of deferred social action applies to the national "intimate public" "constituted by strangers who consume common texts and things" (*Female* viii). Due to its saturation in therapeutic discourse and a tendency to infantilize its citizens, the intimate public values private opinions, frequently informed by loosely defined traumas, more than civic perspectives (*Queen* 1–24). This results in what Berlant elsewhere calls "[f]eeling politics" or "sentimental politics" ("Subject" 57–58), a form of public affect begging the kind of questions that guide her entire scholarship:

> What does it mean for the struggle to shape collective life when a politics of true feeling organizes analysis, discussion, fantasy, and policy? […] what happens to questions of managing alterity or difference or resources in collective life when feeling *bad* becomes evidence for a structural condition of injustice? What does it mean for the theory and practice of social transformation when feeling *good* becomes evidence of justice's triumph? (58, original emphasis).

Given the difficulties to create and sustain it (see section 2.3), intimacy equally speaks to *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant's theorization of present age false consciousness and arguably the culminative notion of her oeuvre: "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Alongside upward mobility and home ownership, intimacy—particularly in the clichéd form of the nuclear family—is after all part and parcel of "the good life's traditional fantasy bribe" that signifies the ongoing allure of the American Dream (7).

Next to Berlant, Richard Sennett might be intimacy's most noted scholar. As the title of his seminal study *The Fall of Public Man* signals, however, his perspective on intimacy is less ambiguous. Tracing the role of public life over the last three centuries, particularly in London and Paris, Sennett tells a story of decline virtually since the end of the *ancient régime* and the burgeoning of a secular capitalist order (16). Following Habermas, Sennett views parks, pubs and coffee houses—city spaces "in which strangers are likely to meet" (48) and engage in codified exchanges—as crucial sites for the negotiation of a social order (17). Whereas the 18th century saw

an equilibrium between private and public concerns, intimate concerns began to colonize the public sphere thereafter, a process that Sennett views as symptomatic for the denial of social problems, such as class conflict: "Intimacy is an attempt to solve the public problem by denying that the public exists. As with any denial, this has only made the more destructive aspects of the past the more firmly entrenched" (27). Writing in the late 1970s, he observes that "people are concerned with their single life-histories and particular emotions as never before; this concern has proved to be a trap rather than a liberation" because intimacy is distracting from rather than addressing the social problems at its core. This then leads to confusion "between public and intimate life; people are working out in terms of personal feelings public matters which properly can be dealt with only through codes of impersonal meaning" (5). This "ideology of intimacy […] transmutes political categories into psychological categories[;]" "now what matters is not what you have done but how you feel about it" (259, 263).

Sennett thus shares the assessment of intimacy's colonizing tendencies and its inability to fulfill its (vague) promises with Berlant, who herself contends that intimacy "creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation" ("Intimacy" 282). Yet she is less deterministic about what Sennett famously calls the "tyrannies of intimacy" (*Fall* 337) and instead accepts intimate publics as an ambivalent byproduct of consumer culture providing "spaces for reflection, recognition, and a positioning of persons in their world, despite the ideologies that may be embedded in the culture of an intimate public" (Linke 16). These contrasting perspectives might well be caused by their different disciplines, which would verify Marianne Streisand's observation that whereas feminist, queer studies or other fields interested in the everyday appreciate intimacy's potentials (e.g. Attwood et al.), it remains suspect to those theories operating with large-scale political concepts ("Intimität/intim" 180; vol. 4).

Attesting to this rule, cultural studies have shown a pronounced interest in intimacy, although not everyone follows Berlant's understanding of it. Queer theorist Tim Dean, for example, closely aligns the intimate with sex and reflects, in his *Unlimited Intimacy*, *on the Subculture of Barebacking*, on the meaning of unprotected sex among men who consciously engage with the risk of HIV/Aids. Dean understands barebacking to imply "an ethic of openness to alterity[,]" and reads it less as a sexual practice than as a figure for an ethical disposition" (30). In his focus on sexual intimacy, Dean and other queer theorists (Reay; Berlant and Warner) follow the impulses by Gayle

S. Rubin and Audre Lorde who in the early 1980s argued against the prohibitive tendencies of second wave feminism and for sexual desire as both a worthy scholarly object and a source of political power. Yet as indicated, intimacy lends itself to reflection in wide-ranging discourses even within the same discipline. This is why James Malcolm's book on an entirely different subject can employ the same header of intimacy. He analyzes how the affect circulating in recent Black British popular Music could create a specific context—the rave—in which barriers of race and class momentarily lost their coercive force. The titular *Sonic Intimacy* emerges when the communal "vibe" of a dancehall or a rave's ecstatic "hype" "exceeds the symbolic" (3, 16).

Although the term is conventionally associated with the opposite, postcolonial criticism highlights intimacy's history of division and exclusion. In western colonial discourses, for example, the gendered distinction between the bourgeois domestic sphere—deemed feminine, orderly, intimate and crucial for the establishment of its counterpart, the democratic public sphere framed in masculine terms (Habermas)—was constructed through the exclusion and depreciation of the racial other. The discursive oversexualization of colonized female subjects, whether Indian, Chinese, Black or Indigenous, functioned as the constitutive contrast to white female domesticity (Stoler 7–8; Nandy 32; Carby 27). The intimate potentials of nationalism, empire and fascism have been subject of analysis from similar perspectives (Ahmed, *Cultural;* McClintock; Strick). Lisa Lowe maintains, for example, that

> the intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family are inseparable from the imperial projects of conquest, slavery, labor, and government […] Just as we may observe colonial divisions of humanity […] there is also a colonial division of intimacy, which charts the historically differentiated access to the domains of liberal personhood, from interiority and individual will, to the possession of property and domesticity (17–18).

Lowe thus seeks to develop a "political economy" that "unsettles the meaning of intimacy as the privileged sign of liberal interiority or domesticity" by shifting the focus toward "global processes and colonial connections that are the conditions of its production" (18). Apart from notable exceptions like Sennett's dated yet still influential work, most contemporary scholarship is justified to reject the gendered dichotomy of private and public as contrived and increasingly anachronistic. Yet maybe precisely because it is a "fantasy" (Berlant, "Intimacy" 283), a strand of the (popular) social sciences holds on to the public-private binary. Here, its delicate balance is usually threatened by societal or technological change (Putnam; Turkle; Marar; Boling). The numerous self-help books on how to achieve, restore or sustain intimacy similarly hold up the public-private binary

(e.g. M. Schwartz) and, through their propagation of necessarily individual solutions, tend to narrow the perspective on intimacy further.

Similar to most of the above examples, this study perceives of intimacy as something beyond the erotic connotation that accompanies conventional definitions of the term virtually since its first use in the 17th century (OED, "intimacy, n.") and still dominates in some discourses (Streisand, "Intimität/intim" 176–77; vol. 4). Given the relationality resulting from intimacy's antithetical inward and outward movements that cannot be neatly ordered in independent spheres, the focus here lies on negotiations of distance and proximity among (groups of) individuals and institutions. These negotiations can gain their "affective intensity"[4] through a sense of presence, perhaps even recognition and trust, among those involved. Since "others cannot breathe the atmosphere of intimacy between intimates" (Wilner 25), judgement on such connections are beside the point unless one is participating oneself (cf. Yousef 3). However, what one can do from the outside is examine if and how cultural expressions exhibit such a longing for intimacy and, furthermore, reflect upon the conditions that might foster, or even demand, the establishment of such relations. For as has become clear by now, (interest in) intimacy is historically contingent.

Discourses of intimacy obviously circulated throughout antiquity, the middle ages as well as in the early modern period (Serafim et al.; Riddy; Bromley), yet, as Streisand asserts, the modern notion of intimacy emerges later. She identifies three historical thresholds in its discursive history: The first partly corresponds with Yousef's archive of *Romantic Intimacy* and stretches along the 17th and 18th centuries when the terms "intimacy" and "intimate" were first popularized to qualify intersubjective relations, the second around 1900 when intimacy becomes a "thick notion" and the third, as implied above, is ongoing (176; vol. 4).[5] Streisand highlights that interest in intimacy frequently correlates with the arrival of new media regimes and the accompanying sense of acceleration. Intimacy's aesthetic prominence around 1900, for example, coincides with the emergence of photography, records and early cinema—all of which were associated with a mechanistic reproduction of surfaces (194; vol. 4). Georg Lukács, for example, associated "absolute presence" with the stage and therefore missed this very presence in cinema (in Streisand, "Intimität/intim" 194; vol. 4). Whereas the new media in the dawning "age of mechanical

[4] "Affective intensity" is used here in reference to Mühlhoff and Slaby on the power of immersive environments and will be returned to in sections 1.2 and 1.4.
[5] This and all subsequent quotations by Streisand translated by FE.

reproduction" lent themselves to mass consumption (Benjamin), "chamber dramas" staged in "intimate theaters" promised not only to investigate the interiorities of Ibsen's or Strindberg's characters, they also ensured the experience's exclusivity by way of small venues and high ticket prices (191–93; vol. 4). The new media also inspired modernism to renegotiate intimacy with regards to new visualities (Linett) as well as, in a different context, against stifling Victorian ideals, such as monogamous marriage (Wolfe).

Streisand's emphasis on the societal changes stimulating reflections on and practices of intimacy afford a certain mobility across western societies, but her focus remains on Europe. In the United States, the 1960s and 70s are frequently identified as decisive for intimacy as a distinct discourse (Shumway 134–40). At the time, particularly counterculture's feminist strands came to reject the view that introspection was "only appropriate for the deviant few" (Nicholson 38) and disseminated psychological notions widely within civil society and state institutions (Illouz, *Saving* 162–71). This led, as David R. Shumway notes, to a reflexive yet only vaguely defined "discourse of intimacy" guided by therapeutic paradigms. Intimacy now "designates both a process and a goal" and might involve, but is not exhausted by, romance, companionship and friendship. Conversely, its elusiveness "is structural to the discourse and deeply bound up with the allure it holds" (141–43). Despite national specificities, there is a scholarly consensus that this understanding of intimacy as something to be perpetually and individually negotiated—as something one must work on (see section 2.3)—has reached an international discursive high point in recent years.

As an expression of discomfort with the acceleration constitutive to (post)modernization, the contemporary yearning for intimacy likewise connects to long-running currents of antimodernism in American culture. T. J. Jackson Lears identifies the late 19th century as the time when influential parts of the bourgeoisie experienced "a sense of dis-ease" with the then "official creed of progress" in social, moral and technological terms (26, 27). To be sure, the present-day desire for intimacy under study here does not match any of the assumed "escape routes" Lears analyzes. The selected fiction is too self-reflected to merely parrot old longings for intense experience through a retreat toward "shreds and patches of republican tradition[,]" (literary) Romanticism or vitalist philosophy (5). However, the texts in question speak to a related longing to "rekindle possibilities for authentic experience, physical or spiritual—possibilities" assumed to have "existed once before" (57). Crucially, they also chime with the half-hearted opposition to

modernity which Lears identifies in a pattern of doubt and re-affirmation: "Half-committed to modernization, antimodernists unwittingly allowed modern culture to absorb and defuse their dissent" (57). Lears' reviewers past and present point to the explicit parallels between the longings around 1900 and later decades. At the time of publication in 1981, it was clear to many that "the story Lears told was a parable of 1960s counter culture made into the New Age spiritualism, therapeutic self-help movements, and mass consumer marketing of alternative culture in the 1970s" (Wickberg). As this dissertation shows, this parable might extend even further, for a similar combination of "frustrated helplessness" (Lears 57) on the one side, and a reluctance to think through fundamental change on the other guides the literary imaginations of intimacy studied in the following. Adhering to Berlant's and especially Sennett's skeptical view on intimacy, "the aesthetics and economics of intimacy" thus risk confining its cultural work to mere alleviation (see chapter 7). Shumway summarizes the dilemma as such: "intimacy at the start of the millennium has become perhaps the most significant refuge from the social fragmentation of late capitalism. Unfortunately, it is a purely private refuge, and thus no solution to the degradation of society" (27). Simultaneously symptom of and remedy for an ongoing cultural "dis-ease" (Lears 26), the turn to intimacy prevents a treatment of its own root cause.

Writing about the tumultuous 1960s, Lears asserts that the "'cultural' revolution […] has done little or nothing to alter the structure of social relations. Despite momentous changes in manners and morals, wealth and power remain in the hands of a few" (25). In apparent agreement, Streisand sees intimacy's ongoing "boom" since the 1990s as a reaction to not only another paradigm shift in the media landscape brought about by digitization, but also the disorienting experience of "globalization and neoliberalism." Social disintegration due to increasingly mobile and deterritorialized labor relations as well as a loss of sensual experience through an ever more mediated engagement with the world create a craving for the intimate: "The increasing interest in researching and thinking about intimacy takes seriously the symptoms of disorientation and loss of values that global flexibilization and dynamization cause for the individual and its immediate environment" (177–78; vol. 4). Streisand first formulated this diagnosis around the millennium, but as recent scholarship on *Social Acceleration* (Rosa) and a heightened sense of loneliness not only during pandemics attest (Hertz), these burdens have only become more pressing. Whereas Streisand emphasizes the estranging effects of contemporary work regimes, section 2.3 shows that for some, work has in fact become an ambivalently intimate affair. Nonetheless, her observation

on the cultural (re)turn to intimacy with its implied reduction of scope, speed and complexity is plausible. According to Simon Reynolds' hyperbole, "[i]n recent years, everyday life has sped up, but culture has slowed down" (in Mark Fisher, *Ghosts* 16). Before turning to some literary examples that could clarify this quite broad remark, however, a brief investigation into the significance of "recent years" helps to clarify this study's scope.

2.1.2. What is Contemporary?

Every period, style or aesthetic trend was "contemporary" at one point, but as Theodore Martin shows, the study of contemporary fiction has a rather short history in the United States. Around the turn of the 20th century, pioneering efforts to liberate literary studies from the then dominant historical methodology were still met with skepticism. In the postwar period, however, the institutional expansion afforded by the GI Bill, the perceived historical rupture provoked by World War II as well as New Criticism's challenge to the historical methodology helped to establish the study of contemporary fiction as it is practiced today. In the 1950s and 60s, "a distinctive burst of institutional energy" brought about several monographs exclusively devoted to contemporary fiction as well as the *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* in 1960. Renamed *Contemporary Literature* in 1969, the journal is still running (Martin 129, 127–32). To Martin, contemporary fiction's institutionalization as a distinct field is the flipside of McGurl's interpretation of the connection between postwar fiction and the university: "the story of the program era is not just the story of how creative writing programs shaped contemporary literature. It is also the story of how such programs helped create the very category of 'contemporary literature.'" Once they shared departments and offices with their colleagues from creative writing, literary scholars naturally started to take an interest in what they were producing (131–32).

Notwithstanding occasional polemics against critical attention for the contemporary (132–33), the rising number of conferences, journals and monographs on the topic today indicate that any lingering prejudice against contemporary fiction as "too easy" in comparison to the timeless classics (Hutner 420) has faded. The Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present as well as the influential collective Post45 (founded in 2007 and 2006 respectively) and their respective journals *ASAP/Journal* and *Post45: Peer Reviewed* illustrate the heightened interest in whatever is contemporary. Together with Columbia University Press's *Literature Now* and the *New American Canon* at University of Iowa Press, Post45's Book series at Stanford University Press complements

the picture of an established academic field. Across the Atlantic, new notable British journals concerned with contemporary fiction include *Alluvium*, *C21 Literature* and *The White Review*.

The contemporary thus enjoys considerable academic attention. But the question of what this "conceptual paradox" (Martin 134) exactly is vexes not only literary studies, as pertinent texts by art historian Terry Smith, anthropologist Paul Rabinow and philosophers Peter Osborne and Giorgio Agamben attest. "And how do you know it when you see it?", Emily Hyde and Sarah Wasserman ask regarding contemporary fiction. What is "the literary contemporary[,]" if not merely "a moving target with a growing list of aliases" (1–2) or "a vaguely deictic gesture; a wave of the hand used to signal some indeterminate span between *around now* and *roughly the last fifty or so years* (Martin 137, original emphasis)? Robert Eaglestone observes that scholars in the field "do not even have a clear idea of what the problems are. It is not that there is a consensus: there is not even a dissensus. We do not even know what the 'basic concepts' are that need to undergo a radical revision." His list of not-yet-problems includes periodization and archive. The issue of periodization, he maintains, is double edged: On the one hand, scholars of the contemporary can rely on a stable border for their period since they "end 'in the now', this minute" (1094). When the contemporary begins, on the other hand, is up for debate. Seminal moments of history—World War II, the end of the Gold Standard, the fall of the Berlin Wall—are more or less plausible temporal markers according to one's methods, location and perspective on (regional, national, global) literature. The lack of consensus on how to periodize it explains the embarrassment of riches in suggestions for what to call today's literature, if not just contemporary: cosmodern (Moraru), exomodern (Huehls 159–68), neoliberal (Huehls and R. G. Smith; Kennedy and Shapiro), post-9/11 (Banita; Spahr), New Sincerity (Kelly) as well as the already mentioned post-postmodern and poststructural realism are just some of the terms for last decades' literature deemed worthy of the archive of the contemporary.[6]

But on which grounds does one choose to elevate a selection of texts over all the others into the contemporary canon? It is evidently difficult to demarcate an archive in a field of research that

[6] Another point of contention concerns the relationship between the contemporary and postmodernism. Is today's literature to be understood as part of a "long modernism" that stretches across postmodernism and into the present (Hungerford, "On"; E. Hyde and Wasserman; McGurl, *Program*). Or has, alternatively, the era "after postmodernism" arrived at last (Gladstone et al.; cf. Scherübl)? Given that Holland's dialectical interpretation on postmodernism's relationship to its successors addresses this problem elegantly and, as the following chapters illustrate, enables nuanced analyses, this debate is not addressed here.

adds "a nineteenth-century-size output […] every three or four months" (English 402). Such runaway size alone poses significant challenges. But the contemporary archive is also constantly evolving and under perpetual re-evaluation (Eaglestone 1093). Years into the new millennium, Hungerford observes, some scholars still feel "discomfort at writing about the literature of the late [20th] century" since they perceive a lack of "focal distance" ("On" 418), and Timothy Bewes similarly thinks of investigations into "The Contemporary Novel" as "almost outrageous" (159). Albeit often rhetorically employed to set up the very investigations into this allegedly outrageous topic, such anxiety is understandable given that the contemporary is constitutively unfinished; its "history remains to be written, while its status as a period waits to be retrospectively bestowed" (Martin 133).

In light of these problems, notably in a field that largely holds on to its American(ist) scope (E. Hyde and Wasserman 2–3) and therefore sidesteps the complexities of the global contemporary, Hungerford's impatience for what to call "the field formerly known as contemporary" is understandable (416). Indeed, scholarship on the history of literary studies and periodization substantiates the intuition that periodization "itself is a suspect gesture" (Eaglestone 1094; cf. Underwood). Since questions of period prove unhelpful when thinking about scholarship on the contemporary, Hyde and Wasserman suggest paying attention to method instead. In this view,

> the term marks not only the objects scholars elect to study but also the methods they deem most effective in studying them. Together, the objects critics select and how they read them define the period as it unfolds […] a given mode of analysis tends to produce a particular historical claim about the contemporary […] and this claim then delimits a particular literary archive (3).

This turn to method not only sidesteps the problems of period and archive, it also helps to explain the vastly divergent material studied under the header "contemporary." After surveying some methodological trends, Hyde and Wasserman end with a proposal to follow Caroline Levine in attempting to resolve the opposition between form and period. Once periodization is recognized as a form, Hyde and Wasserman posit, one can identify "a shared concern with time and temporality in both criticism and fiction" "despite the multiple 'clocks' used to periodize the contemporary" (11). Section 4.1 will discuss Levine's New Formalism (as well as its problems) in more detail, but at this point Hyde and Wasserman's suggestion helps to pinpoint this study's contemporary focus. More specifically, it helps to recognize in what ways the examined novels are contemporary

beyond their publication dates, although they happen to roughly adhere to Eaglestone's "'rule of thumb' […] that the contemporary is the last ten years" (1095).

The texts under consideration in the following chapters show explicit interest in how competing temporalities of the present enable or hinder intimacy. Those of Wallace's readers willing to make sense of a fragmented and sprawling novel in "real time" are rewarded with the intimacy of "quality time." Egan's text warns against both a nostalgic view on the past as well as a naïve hope for the future and insists that intimacy is only to be had in the fleeting moment of the present. This is true also for Lin's *Taipei*, with the crucial difference that the present moment seems everlasting and inescapable. Browning's *The Gift* in turn juxtaposes intersubjective intimacy in the digital and analog realms with regards to its temporal experience.

The texts also relate to other current scholarly debates. Wallace's *The Pale King* examines the use of bureaucratic institutions during neoliberal governance, *A Visit From the Goon Squad* probes the flexibility mandated by the network—one of Levine's *Forms*—for insights into competing temporalities in past, present and future. Lin's *Taipei* and Browning's *The Gift* both engage with autofiction, albeit on markedly different terms. The latter's insistence on the value of knowledge production through the intimate medium of the body in turn connects to postcritique (discussed in chapter 2.4). Furthermore, all texts do not only overtly acknowledge the readers' presence but respectively task them with completing a not-yet realized vision or, as in *The Gift*, even beguile them as potential collaborators. In this way, the novels relate to Adam Kelly's notion of the New Sincerity, whose direct appeal to the readership, as section 2.5 shows, complements postcritique's ideal of harmonious teamwork. Lastly, from *The Pale King*'s countless files and *Goon Squad*'s melancholia for analog media to Lin's and Browning's juxtaposition of online and face-to-face intimacies, all texts also deliberate the status of (printed) literature in what Ted Striphas calls *The Late Age of Print*.

In summary, the fiction selected for this study supports Martin's hypothesis that the scholarly and literary interest in the contemporary reinforce each other. For him, "the most unmistakable sign of the contemporary's ascendance as a scholarly category is that it has now become a subject for the contemporary novel" (124). This interest does not only become evident through explicit concerns with the themes, methods or forms of the contemporary—as it does in Martin's example, Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island*—but expresses itself foremost through setting.

Specifically, this study's four novels oppose James F. English's observation that, since the 1980s, novels bestowed with the prestige of either literary awards or their short lists have moved toward historical settings. Wallace's *The Pale King*—published in 2011, set in 1985 and with a clear historicist agenda—just about adheres to English's definition of a "historical" novel as set at least twenty years in the past (406). But Egan's temporal setting splits into "past/present/future" (406) and both Lin's *Taipei* and Browning's *The Gift* are firmly entrenched in the present. Beyond such arbitrary demarcations, the following chapters will make clear that the texts utilize the contemporary as the "strange currency" Martin thinks of it, "one whose value lies less in the term's capacity to confidently mark out the present than in its description [of] the difficulties involved in doing so" (137).

2.2. Aesthetics and Economics of Intimacy

Before the chapters 3 through 6 will offer literary case studies of the aesthetics and economics of intimacy in detail, two brief examples will indicate the broad range of the literary phenomenon at the heart of this dissertation. First, consider the following passage from Rachel Kushner's widely lauded *The Flamethrowers* (2013), a novel that is "historical" in English's understanding by way of being set in that "ragged decade" of the 1970s (Dames, "Seventies"). The narrator, an aspiring land artist nicknamed Reno after her Nevadan hometown, lies in bed with her partner Sandro, a minimalist artist and scion of an industrial empire who first introduces her to New York's conceptual art scene and later takes her to his native Italy. It is early in the morning and an eventful night lies behind them. On their way home, a mugger threatened them with a knife, Sandro then overreacted and shot the assailant. Reno rushed to call for an ambulance, Sandro waited for it to arrive before leaving "the scene" (205). As they reunite at home, Reno is "flooded with sympathy for him. The only fair thing […] was to try to share the psychic sympathy for his mistake" (203).

> Sandro stared at me as if to confirm we were in the same register. I stared back, unsure what the register was. It seemed important to convey that I understood. Isn't that what intimacy so often is? Supposing you understand, conveying that you do, because you feel in theory that you *could* understand, and you want to, and yet secretly you don't? (204, original emphasis).

Reno's reflection illustrates that, because intimacy's "mode of communication is intimation[,]" "intent alone" cannot bring it about; "conscious efforts" are actually counterproductive (Wilner 24–25). The passage also exemplifies Yousef's paradox of intimacy as Reno's pretense of mutual

understanding cannot bridge the gap between her and Sandro's "register." Moreover, Yousef's assertion that intimacy does not necessitate relational symmetry is similarly evoked: already by the next sentence Reno's deliberations are cut short: "Then he was pulling my underwear off and I didn't need to understand […] Sandro descended, his breath against my thighs." Reno considers this an "act of violence" but because Sandro "never cared about reciprocity" she "relaxe[s] and let[s] [her] mind wander." "I was half-removed from what was happening […] an asymmetry that was meant to be read as connection, a man's face […] between a woman's legs, and her focus on fruition. Not gratitude, not intimacy, just fruition" (204–05).

That Reno does not "need to understand" is one of *The Flamethrowers*' central motives and extends to her adventures in the art world and Italian radical politics. Many commentators have read her passivity as an allegory for women's lack of power (not only) in the art world (L. Miller, "Rachel"; Miriello; Mak). In turn, Myka Tucker-Abramson views Reno as sentimental and politically naïve who, as she moves Eastward from the newly industrialized Nevada to the deindustrialized New York City in urban crisis and eventually to the politically unsettled Italy without ever grasping the economic interrelation of these locales (87). Although not the novel's primary focus, a similar sense of incomprehension reigns the intimate relations of Reno, who remains unable to integrate her emotional burdens—caused, for example, by Sandro's machismo—into an understanding that connects her emotional with the larger economic turmoil. Yet her inability to form such an understanding does not diminish the novel's ability to make these relationships palpable. For Tucker-Abramson, *The Flamethrowers* succeeds only when it is read against its protagonist (74–75). The above passage might thus depict an unsuccessful attempt at intimacy because, instead of experiencing each other's "wholeness" (Wilner 22), Reno remains trapped in Sandro's sexual "register" in which she can focus "not on intimacy, just [on] fruition." Yet the text nevertheless exhibits an interest characteristic of the fiction in question here. By way of merging the economic, political and emotional turmoil that accompanied post-Fordism's burgeoning, *The Flamethrowers* sheds a light on the very connection between intimate and economic matters guiding dissertation: an awareness for the exceedingly difficult task to overcome intersubjective divides, to reach out and achieve some form of unity with the other.

As a second example shows, this other at times appears to be the reader. Joshua Ferris' *Then We Came to the End* (2007), a novel about an advertisement agency during the dot-com crisis,

is guided by the first-person plural, a collective "we," of the agency's employees threatened by job cuts. On the novel's last page, this perspective is broken when the implied reader appears to be included in their circle: "We were the only two left. Just the two of us, you and me" (385). There is not only a palpable acknowledgement of an other on display, but also a desire for mutual recognition, even approval. Kelly uses Ferris' novel to illustrate the literary New Sincerity ("David" 145–46), but by overlooking that the displayed recognition is limited to a class peer, he unwittingly confirms Sarah Brouillette's observation that "[a]s a site of identification, style of cultural activity, and form of education, the literary" often effaces "the primary social relations that are necessary to its own flourishing" (*UNESCO* 5). In other words, Brouillette views literary culture as thriving on social obliviousness. Earlier, the novel's narrative voice indeed muses that "there are, what, a hundred and fifty million of us in the workplace?" (159), nodding toward the entire white-collar workforce of the American States (Mueller 70). As "one of us," in other words, the reader is a fellow knowledge worker. The communion between the characters of Ferris' novel and the readers is representative insofar as the kind of literature under consideration here is produced and consumed by those intimately familiar with white-collar work arrangements. Although not as exclusive as the intimate theaters or antimodernists circles around 1900 (Streisand, *Intimität;* Lears), the recent turn to intimacy remains a privileged affair for the simple reason that the vast majority of people reading, writing or teaching literature have at least a middle class background and a college degree (cf. Shumway 7). In terms of the introductory example of Moshfegh's literary lockdown: those who can choose to stay in (and work remote) when that seems advisable are a likely audience of the novels discussed here.

Rhetorical gestures of direct address such as in Ferris' novel, frequently combined with a prominent authorial persona and a topical attention to today's precarious nature of conventional bonds in families, intimate relations or with friends are a prominent characteristic of the "aesthetics and economics of intimacy" at the core of this dissertation. Yet when communication is perceived to be corrupted by commercial or personal interests, genuine intimacy—successfully *Imagining 'We' in the age of 'I'* (Harrod et al.)—faces considerable challenges. What is of primary interest to this study then, is the very desire for intimate states that, judging by a wide array of cultural responses, seem to have become unfeasible. To take up one example, the commercial struggle of the culture industry's formulaic romcoms attests to a crisis of romance since "the broad turn towards economic precaritization in recent years deprives the 'chick flick' of one of its key

functions: the assembling of an adult couple who can flourish in a credible, functional institutional order“ (Cobb and Negra 757; cf. Negra). If romance, as Eva Illouz argues in *Consuming the Romantic Utopia*, is a commodity, a purchasable experience, its crisis might well be explained by the fact that since the Great Recession, fewer people can afford it. Similarly, a strand of recent literature outright rejects conventional romantic bonds. Ashley Shelden argues that, given that fantasies of love are crumbling, "novelists now reimagine love in the negative, dissonant with what we typically take love to be. […] By 'unmaking love', the contemporary novel dismantles romantic idealism and exposes as impossible our collective fantasy that intimacy has the capacity to unite us" (1). In turn, this dissertation's primary texts join this trend of fiction similarly conscious of intimacy's precariousness (cf. Gratzke). Yet in contrast, they insist not only on its (contingent) feasibility, but also its necessity.

This shift in literary aesthetics is commonly traced back to Wallace, particularly a 1993 essay on television and fiction in which he laments a supposed stasis in (postmodern) American culture and calls for the "next real literary 'rebels.'" Because irony seems hegemonic to him, Wallace seeks artistic dissent and innovation in a willingness to display naivety (192–93). Section 3.1 will discuss his intervention in more detail, but the continuing attention given to him as a trailblazer for the New Sincerity in American Fiction (Kelly) and elsewhere (e.g. Gallagher; Farmer) prove his appeal a success at first glance already. Many prominent American writers, such as Dave Eggers, Jonathan Safran Foer and Richard Powers are influenced by Wallace. David Shields' proclamation of *Reality Hunger*, the desire to explore the inner life of oneself and others, exemplifies the fruit of Wallace's intention to overcome "that wall of self, and portraying inner experience" and establish "a kind of intimate conversation between two consciences" (in Lipsky 289). Even the larger trend of autofiction—to be discussed in section 5.2—can be related to Wallace (Konstantinou, "Wallace's" 59). At any rate, the numerous references to him throughout pop culture demonstrate that his influence clearly exceeds the literary sphere (Beers; Fitzgerald; Thorn; cf. A. O. Scott; Magill). The writers listed above exemplify a notable homogeneity among those reviewing sincerity. Not only were canonized postmodernists overwhelmingly white males (Kelly, "Beginning" 416–17), the same applies to those seeking to overcome postmodernism around the millennium. As Richard Jean So shows, postwar literature by white authors dominated book reviews, prizes and the book market even more than is commonly assumed (1–26). The same applies to scholarship, as "most book-length works of criticism on contemporary literature are

about novels by white men" (E. Hyde and Wasserman 3). For this reason, this study is interested not only in how practices of intimacy relate to material conditions, it also draws attention to writers, such as Lin and Browning, who have heretofore been at the margins of scholarly conversation.

To return to the described aesthetic shift toward intimacy, its prominent concern with subjecthood, interiority and communication stands in clear contrast to the playful challenge of human subjectivity in canonical postmodernism. Tyrone Slothrop of Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, finds himself in competition for the status as the novel's protagonist with scores of other characters and arguably with the novel's idiosyncratic form itself. Conversely, the literature of Wallace and those following him exhibits a realist interest in the delicate dynamics of (inter)human subjectivity. Wallace's fiction circles around its characters' complex interiorities and contemplates the impossibility to "be yourself" despite social and professional mandates to constantly adapt. Many texts address the question of whether (and how) barriers of solipsism and self-consciousness can be overcome in order to reach out to others when so much of human communication is fraught with commercial or personal interest. The deliberations of Wallace's often autobiographically inspired characters are frequently presented in an emulation of the century-old confessional mode.

As a communicative medium, the effort to reach out to the reader is inherent to literature and emotional reactions to and connections with works of fiction have been the object of scholarly interest for a long time. Similarly, some see "emotional involvement" (Robinson 72) as integral to the hermeneutic process—a line of thought recently reinvigorated by postcritique (see section 2.4). Indeed, a reader's identification with a narrative voice resonating in her mind and perhaps even evolving further into some intimate presence might be as old as literary writing. The history of American fiction certainly has suitable examples: Huckleberry Finn or Holden Caulfield exemplify how narrative voices can engender personal relationships with literary characters. However, Mark Twain's masterful irony and J.D. Salinger's infamous seclusion counteract the kind of intense relationship between reader and writer, however imagined, that John Holliday calls "authorial connectedness" (2). The psychological novel is an important predecessor in this context, since it usually fosters readerly connections, albeit to characters rather than authors. Unsurprisingly, postmodernist literature was skeptical of the genre. After the likes of George Eliot and Henry James canonized, and modernists like Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner radicalized the psychological

novel's ability to effect human consciousness (Vrettos 1–3), postmodernism caricatured the assumptions underlying the psychological narrative. Here, characters are depicted as "intentionally flat, ghostly, or cartoon-like" and thus as quite the opposite of the complex and self-reflective figures found in conventional psychological narratives (4–5).

Another strand of postwar fiction heralds this dissertation's primary texts in that it has registered the cultural decline of romance and turned to the newly emerged difficulties of intimacy: Woody Allen's and Paul Mazursky's movies of the 1970s and 80s tell self-reflexive "relationship stories" about troubled intimacies (Shumway 157–87) and the realist "marriage fiction" of John Updike and Alison Lurie likewise tracks changing patterns of unfaithful marriage from the 1960s onward (188–214). Both genres register the marriage crisis (to be discussed in 2.3) but simultaneously observe that its ostensible alternative, the relationship, is "likely not to work" either (158). These genres resemble the fiction discussed here in important ways, but their frequently ironic mode neither evinces the persisting hope in intimacy on display in the fiction of e.g. Wallace, nor do they recognize the reader as a potential intimate.

Wallace's omnipresence in the critical discourse on recent American fiction can be contextualized by the convergence of his efforts and a generally increased interest in the categories of sincerity and authenticity (Funk et al.). Although Hal Foster had proclaimed *The Return of the Real* in American art as early as 1996, it was 9/11's "visual narrative of trauma" that led many to believe (though not for the first time) that postmodern theory and its fondness for play, irony and detachment had exhausted itself, the perpetual "play of signifiers" lost its intellectual currency (Haselstein et al. 14). In Lionel Trilling's account of sincerity and authenticity, the former implies a connection to others so they can witness one's truthfulness. Conversely, authenticity entails privacy as it encompasses being truthful to oneself without concern for others (9).[7] Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal specify this relationship by referring to sincerity as "a natural enactment of authenticity anchored in, and yielding, truth;" a corporeal rather than textual transfer that, due to

[7] For an account of Sincerity and it's political implications markedly different from Trilling, see Elizabeth Markovits who questions Trilling's separation of sincerity and authenticity (21 fn 23) and instead argues that sincerity underlies many political theories of the last decades, most notably Jürgen Habermas' influential theory on communicative action, which sees mutual trust as axiomatic for an ethical discourse, (cf. Eve, *Literature* 123). In a polemic against the "Our Overrated Inner Self," Orlando Patterson conversely challenges the value of authenticity—"I couldn't care less whether my neighbors and co-workers are authentically sexist, racist or ageist"—and suggests a pragmatic understanding of sincerity: "What matters is that they behave with civility and tolerance, obey the rules of social interaction and are sincere about it. The criteria of sincerity are unambiguous: 'Will they keep their promises?'"

the inherent ambiguity of the bodily medium, is prone to misunderstandings (1). After poststructuralism's appeal faced some challenges, both sincerity and authenticity returned with force, though not in a form that re-established the innocence of a surface/depth model of subjectivity. Quite to the contrary, as Ulla Haselstein et al. highlight, these returns are shaped by the very theories they move away from: "Although sometimes envisioned as the rejection of postmodernism, the 'new' authenticity remains profoundly shaped by postmodern skepticism regarding the grand narratives of origin, telos, reference, and essence" (*Pathos* 19). Similar to Holland's observation about contemporary literature's relationship to postmodernism, Alphen and Bal's approach is a case in point for this informed revival. "In a traditional sense," they write, sincerity indicates "the performances of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it." But this implies, as van Alphen and Bal immediately highlight, a "split" between surface and depth "that assaults the traditional integration that marks sincerity" (3). They seek to tease out such tensions, rather than flat-out dismissing the concept with reference to "a vulgarized and misunderstood 'postmodern irony'" (5). Such rejection of sincerity would be problematic

> given the ongoing, crucial political and cultural function of speech acts that have been associated with sincerity (such as vows and oaths) or its absence […] A different analysis and evaluation of such speech acts—the idea that performance overrules expression—must not be mistaken for a naïve dismissal of these acts as 'just' play. The undeniable presence and persistence of these acts co-exist, instead, with a transformed conception of subjectivity, a transformed idea of what we believe today to be sincere behavior or expression (5).

In their plea for a "transformed idea" of sincerity anchored in speech acts, van Alphen and Bal seek to intellectually untie sincerity from subjectivity (5). In literary terms, Martin Paul Eve in turn contends that sincerity can be best observed through a form of authorship that admits literature's falsehood and emphasizes its own performative dimension, but then offsets this acknowledgement with a promise of aesthetic consistency ("Sincerity" 40). As the next section shows, such (self)conceptualizations can be contextualized as part of reflexive modernity that mandates self-awareness and perpetual adaption.

2.3. Reflexive Modernization: Intimacy's Risks

According to Ulrich Beck's seminal proposal, modernity has, during the 20th century, turned its critical vigor on itself, "*consumed and lost its other* and now undermines its own premises as an industrial society along with its functional principles." In western societies, "*pre*-modernity" has been conquered by rational inquiry and "is being displaced by *reflexive* modernization."

Virtually everything is routinely revised, and few things remain certain: "industrial society *destabilizes itself through its very establishment*. Continuity becomes the 'cause' of discontinuity" (10, 14, original emphases). Consequently, success hinges upon the ability to adapt to ever-changing constellations of provisional knowledge and uncertainty. The category of risk, epistemologically mediating between the known and the unknown, gains importance in such circumstances—hence Beck's notion of the *Risk Society*. This study's interest in the changing relationship between intimacy and work relations signifies one suitable example for the reflexive development he describes.

The post-Fordist transformation of the United States during the second half of the 20th century has had a fundamental cultural impact. As jobs moved from the factory to offices and shops, the demands on the workforce changed accordingly. C. Wright Mills anticipated a change of paradigms in the "shift from skills with things to skills with persons" (182). The growing importance of "skills with persons" illustrates how economic transformations interact with cultural norms. The ability to recognize and negotiate the perpetually changing emotional and affective dispositions of oneself and others exemplifies a post-industrial skill set as well as what Eva Illouz describes as the gradual convergence of economic and emotional spheres during the 20th century. Lears traces the roots of the therapeutic worldview back "into the cultural turmoil of the late nineteenth century" and specifically to a turn "from fixed values to values in constant process[,]" i.e. a shift toward self-reflexivity (56, 54). Due to the success of numerous psychological schools, this perspective expanded from its origins in education and psychology and gained influence in human relations both at home and at work. A crucial factor for the rising importance of what Illouz dubs "emotional capital" (214) is associated with the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and its gradual but thorough impact in the subsequent decades.

Boltanski and Chiapello have identified the importance of the "artistic critique" (xiii) against rigid hierarchies and centralized authority in the liberalization of corporate structures. As studies on the relationship between art and work arrangements illustrate, the term can be taken literally. Jasper Bernes argues "that the various literary and artistic experimental cultures of the 1960s and 1970s helped to *articulate*, though certainly not to create" the workers' "qualitative complaints and demands" (8, original emphasis). The "artistic critique" thus refers both to a more liberal lifestyle as well as to critiques by actual artists. Julia Bryan-Wilson similarly describes how

"the emphasis on participation, flexibility, and multitasking" moved from "the studio into the factory" (219, qtd. in Bernes 199)—and, one might add, into the office. In the second half of the 20th century, and particularly after the 1960s, employers increasingly appreciated that "successful management depended substantially on managers' ability to understand others and to handle human relations in general" (Illouz, *Saving* 69).The return of authenticity and self-expression, categories once central in Romanticism, enabled discourses of one's own and others' feelings. An increased awareness of psychological needs and a rhetoric of self-care brought intimacy to the workplace in the form of the therapeutic mode. Illouz's work chimes with much scholarship on entrepreneurial conceptions of the self, notably with Foucault's description of the neoliberal subject "as entrepreneur of himself […] being for himself his producer, being for himself his own capital, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (*Birth* 226).

Once management wisdom has taken the "artistic critique" to heart, the breakout from routines was tolerated and even encouraged. Whereas the industrial workers at Ford were prohibited to even whistle at the assembly line (Sward 312), post-Fordism calls for flexible arrangements of production, consumption and affecting forms of labor (Burnham; J. Scott). Alongside the changing demands on workers, open-plan offices encouraging collaboration replaced cubicle-structures.[8] Dale Carnegie's seminal advice to "influence people" implied the instrumentalization of emotions, e.g. by a commitment to harmony both at home and at work that effaces any negative affect. "The message was clear[,]" Peter Stearns summarizes the dominant stance on negative emotions at work in the early 20th century, "in offices, stores, and factories alike: anger at work was ugly, counterproductive and unnecessary" (123).

The "artistic critique" modifies this mandate: Instead of the tight harnessing of emotions, their "intuitive" and "authentic" flow is now valued as the key to success. (Notably, these liberated emotions are generally assumed to be positive and constructive.) Another influential ideal type of industrial modernity was arguably even overturned: The "other-directed character", or "radar," David Riesman's description of a conformist type constantly adapting to the demands of their social environment (25), has become an inversed role model. Today's ideal type monitors its environment as closely as the "radar," but with opposing intentions. Instead of blending in, the goal is to stand

[8] In some spheres, this development took such excessive forms that interventions now aim to (re)integrate the "hiding space" back into openly structured office space (Stäheli 244–61).

out (Reckwitz 9). Yet once enough people internalize this new mandate, to stand out becomes so commonplace as to be the new blending in. It is such dialectics that the fiction under examination indulges in.

Consider this illustration of the "artistic critique" coming full circle and back to (popular) art. Dolly Parton's song "9 to 5," like the 1980 comedy film of the same name it was written for, portrays a worker frustrated by the fact that she is "Barely getting by, it's all taking and no giving" and the general futility of white-collar work under capitalistic and patriarchal conditions: "They let you dream just to watch them shatter / You're just a step on the boss man's ladder." Although she certainly "deserve[s] a fair promotion," requesting one would likely result in her replacement by one of the many "folks like me[.]" Yet true to the social mobility kitsch that Parton's art adheres to, there is some hope. After all, "you've got dreams he'll never take away" and at some point "the tide's gonna turn an' it's all gonna roll your way" (Parton, "9 to 5"). About four decades later, a suitable interval for post-Fordism's establishment, a revised version of Parton's song elaborates on how the worker can fulfill her "dreams"—during after-work hours.

In a commercial for a website building company that ran during the 2021 Superbowl half time break, she at first sings again about the drudgery of "9 to 5" but then focuses on the freedom of "5 to 9." Both songs begin with a verbatim indictment of the disregard for the workers' humanity in the inflexible hierarchies of the white-collar office. But then the interpolation pivots to introduce a bootstraps solution to the dehumanizing tendency of white-collar work: "Working 5 to 9, you've got passion and a vision / 'Cause it's hustlin' time, a whole new way to make a livin' / Gonna change your life, do somethin' that gives it meanin' / With a website that is worthy of your dreamin.'" The freelance work also promises affective gratification since "it feels so fine to build a business" with "a lotta your friends" and "ideas you all believe in[.]" In the original song, the male boss is identified as the representative and beneficiary of the sexist work arrangement. (In the movie, the workers played by Jane Fonda, Lily Tomlin and Parton even kidnap him.) In its praise of an apparently autonomous worker, the sequel effaces such social antagonism. She might still have to endure the usual drudgery, but instead of fretting about being stepped on by the boss on his way up, you can now "Be your own boss, climb your own ladder[.]" Both songs insist that "it's all gonna roll your way" in the end, an insistence on eventual success signaling that the promised wealth and happiness remains in perpetual deferral for the post-Fordist worker as much as it did

for her Fordist predecessor. However, causes for the potential failure to reach such blissful self-fulfillment must now be looked for in the individual. If she fails to "change [her] life, do something that gives it meaning" despite having all the right tools (to build a website), she must be at fault somehow (Parton, "5 to 9").

This sketch illustrates the ideological transformation of work into a site of self-expression and self-realization. Some iconic employers in the information technology sector express this change through their "campuses" and "start-up hubs," venues designed to harness the employee's creativity, incentivize self-determined arrangements and workflows and thus allow for individual divergences from standard procedure s (for critiques see Sennett, *Building* 147–52; Spencer 73–109). In a reversal of industrial modernity's disciplinary regime, contemporary human resource management promotes positive affect through "fun officers" and "'Wow!' departments" meant to foster harmony and cohesion in corporate structures (Gregg, *Work* 74–75). The shout of wow! is associated with the influential management writer Tom Peters, whom Christopher Newfield describes as a "corporate humanist. His ideas build on a long tradition of 'humanistic' management theory, one which began to develop out of hostility to the reigning Taylorist paradigm of scientific management" (*Ivy* 201; cf. "Corporate"). Corporate humanism, in Newfield's summary, promises to, firstly, create workers who are happier because they prefer to do good rather than careless work, secondly, to create a positive work experiences, thirdly, such positive work experiences and production increase when employees are left to self-manage (201–02).

Peters' gospel clearly comes with dubious blessings, so suffice it to point to a telling intersection between his bestselling *In Search of Excellence* of 1982 and the sociology of emotional labor. One of the Peters' "excellent" companies praised for its "team spirit" is Delta Air Lines (283), the same company whose flight attendants are meticulously studied in Hochschild's groundbreaking 1983 work, *The Managed Heart*. In short, Hochschild tells a different story about the company headquartered in the nonunionized South: "Delta's company demands are higher and its worker demands lower than in other companies" (13). While the "corporate humanist" Peters values the company's "family feeling" (103), its employees' uncompensated emotional labor does not enter the equation. Because—rather than despite—of this blind spot for the individual consequences of the mandate of positive affect, self-management and establishment of familial atmospheres at workspaces are on the rise. The much-discussed blurring of the public and the

private is exemplified by prevalent information technologies facilitating permanent availability through online communication on the one hand and the "growing demand for care and fulfillment as much as for employment" met by the "ambience management" of coworking spaces on the other (Gregg and Lodato 177, 188–89).

In *Work's Intimacy*, Melissa Gregg analyzes instances of "enforced intimacy" and the subtle disciplining mechanisms emanating from ostensible democratic work modes (75). Because teamwork, for example, relies on arrangements among supposed equals—peers without (much) hierarchy between them—the abstraction of "the team" replaces the visible authority of the manager. As Alan Liu shows, teamwork culture promotes diversity while erasing the history that each member brings along. "Join the team" eventually translates as "leave your identity group and history behind[.]" "The team thus disintegrates all bonds of race, ethnicity, gender, and so on to create just-in-time or on-the-fly cultures diversified by 'skills' and 'talents' oriented toward maximizing results" (*Laws* 53, 57). With competitive sports as the reference point, "the team is paramount" for each of its members; its success or failure reflects back onto every member (Gregg, *Work* 76). One of Gregg's interview partners works only part-time but always checks her emails "to keep an eye on what is happening" and in case something comes up that "is urgent and only I can do." Given her commitment to the team, it would entail "more stress" to let others wait until her next workday. The fear of being the team's weakest link illustrates "teamwork's interpellative power" (76–77). With reference to Gregg's work, Rainer Mühlhoff and Jan Slaby illustrate how the prevalent forms in knowledge work cultures weaken "classic dichotomies of work vs. leisure, production vs. consumption, duty vs. pleasure" (170). Not only are work relations designed to be more intimate *at the workplace*, ubiquitous online communication facilitates an entanglement of such relations

> with private life spheres, forming a whole arrangement of diverse relations (co-workers, partner, child), practices (doing work from various places and situations), spaces (office, home, bed, driveway, couch), narratives ('only I can do it') and psychological complexes ('sensitivity to others,' wanting to be appreciated, thankfulness, guilt) of several people (166).

Such arrangements paradoxically effect the (further) individualization of its team members. The communal practice and apparent absence of authority increases individual liability.

The described flexibilization grants and simultaneously demands autonomy. Max Weber's seminal metaphor for both internalized capitalist rationalization as well as a rigid industrial

rationality, the "iron cage" (123), no longer constrains the average white-collar worker. But its replacement comes with new burdens. Given that post-Fordism leaves the individual no choice but to permanently choose between predetermined alternatives (Bröckling 14), industrial modernity's rigid structures and routines almost appear comforting. As Sennett quips, "the 'iron cage' was both prison and home" (*Culture* 180) and the strict work arrangements in the heyday of Taylorism could indeed foster strong communities. Because work was clearly delineated by a shift's duration, Liu argues that despite technology's supreme reign, "the Fordist-Taylorist line […] was not just dehumanizing:"

> Exile from one's humanity simultaneously created the sense of a whole working-class neighborhood away from neighborhood, a community with so much potential for solidarity that it could have its own after-hours hangouts, charities, bowling leagues, youth subcultures, and so on (*Laws* 53).

Though Liu adds that such "cultural solidarity […] was often effectively quarantined in 'leisure'" (53), it nevertheless speaks to powerful forms of community among those who had to labor under the unrelenting dictates of the assembly line. Liu also discusses the somatic dimension of knowledge work. The bodies inhabiting "the air-conditioned, pristine, even clinical purity of the high-tech cubicle" "may not sweat or bruise, but as proven by the recent history of workers' litigation and federal regulation, they 'stress'" (268). In Liu's economic analogy, "endless mobility of information and capital" "is paid for by paralyzing workers in bodily positions or repetitive motions," resulting in the "stress injuries" of "painstiffened wrists, necks, and backs" (268). Although these are primarily somatic aches, the many psycho-somatic links of stress symptoms reveal the emotional strains caused by such (work) environment.

All this calls into question the enthusiasm radiating from the "fun officers" mentioned above. Apart from the frequently infantilizing tendency of such work environments' design (Swartz) and the corporate efforts to harness spirituality toward productivity (Chen; cf. R. J. Williams, *Buddha*), the claim of self-fulfillment through wage labor must remain questionable. Empirical scholarship on contemporary workplaces highlights the burdens of the contradicting frameworks that permanently evaluate workers while telling them to 'be themselves,' 'have fun' and 'be playful' (Kinnie et al.; Warren and Fineman; Sørensen and Spoelstra; Abramis). The stress created by such contradictions must then be kept in check by the reign of a self-conscious 'cool' that many see as a central feature of post-Fordist work life, and which Wallace identified as the dominant expression of American culture (see section 3.1). In other words, the high affect on

display in such environments is likely brought about by a "regime of management by stress" (Liu, *Laws* 46, 62).[9]

As such examples illustrate, reflexive modernization manifests itself in the unstable relations between individuals and institutions. With regard to intimacy, the changes in marriage and the nuclear family illustrate this development. The gendered separation of paid wage labor and unpaid reproductive labor expressed in the ideal type of marriage has served as the basis for industrial modernity. But in the course of the 20th century, when middle-class women entered wage labor in increasing numbers, this conventional division lost its normative force. As fewer people adhered to traditional protocols and (must) autonomously shape their intimate lives, the institution of marriage became crisis-laden; the antimodernist impulse to retreat into an idealized sphere of domesticity was no longer feasible (Shumway 22–23; Lears 15). In turn, the reflexive "relationship" gained importance, a term whose connotation as "an emotional and sexual association or partnership" entered the *OED* only in the mid-20th century. For Anthony Giddens, the ideal type of such connections is the "pure relationship" whose key characteristics all stand in contrast to traditional marriage. Pure relationships are freely chosen and may be revoked at any time, perpetually reflected upon, and legitimized through mutual commitment. Moreover, they are geared toward emotional rewards, seek to constantly recreate mutual trust (rather than presuppose it) and foster a co-constitution between those involved (Giddens, *Modernity* 88–89; cf. *Transformation*).

As with the described flexibilization of work relations, the emancipatory potential is obvious. But since Giddens' description of *The Transformation of Intimacy* is easily mistaken for a list of requirements, not everyone shares his optimism, particularly about its alleged capability to bring about social change "from the bottom up" (182). Numerous scholars draw attention to the complications arising from intimacy's alleged democratization: precisely because the rhetoric of Giddens and others holds that everyone *can* create and sustain intimacy, it masks the very inequalities preventing some to excel at the required kind of (self)management (Illouz, *Saving* 142–

[9] Several qualifications should be kept in mind. Beck writes himself that the principles of reflexive modernization do not apply universally but are limited to developed societies that concluded and quite often partially reversed the process of industrialization. Furthermore, the summarized process of flexibilization within corporate hierarchies and the rise in work environments that emphasize individual autonomy and creativity frequently is the privilege of people with "lovely jobs," but "lousy jobs" remain a majority (Goos and Manning 119). The sector of the "new economy," though gaining paradigmatic importance (e.g. for how citizens are *activated* through public services), has a cultural impact deserving of analytical attention, but is still relatively small (Sennett, *Culture* 7–10).

49; cf. Jamieson; Storkey). Not only does the workspace appropriate the intimacies of the home; conversely, economic paradigms such as contractual rationality and surveillance technology colonize private relations (Hochschild, *Time;* Gregg, "Spouse-Busting"). The norms presumed to "govern family life became less clear, uncertain, and more open to argument and negotiation" (Illouz, *Saving* 119) or, as Shumway summarizes: "Intimacy was once what distinguished marriage and family from most other social relations; it is now a quality that marriages may or may not have and that couples are told they must work to attain" (25). The ensuing complexities mandate the management of one's biographical contradictions (U. Beck 115) as well as the perpetual search for new connections.

These dynamics have only intensified since Beck formulated them. Ulrich Bröckling diagnoses further demands from the individual and identifies the entrepreneur as exemplary for how one perceives oneself and others. The mandates to always be active, self-optimizing and efficient culminates in "the entrepreneurial self," a subject in perpetual search of the 'next opportunity' in all realms of life (cf. W. Brown, *Undoing*). Andreas Reckwitz similarly argues that because large institutions no longer intransigently shape the self, one must individually curate it. As a result, immaterial resources like networks or individual character traits gain importance on the personality marketplace of post-industrial economies. In what he calls "the society of singularities," the value of unusual or even unique experiences are elevated to benchmark status. The following sections show how postcritique and New Sincerity, in their valorization of singularity, simultaneously reflect an awareness and a vague unease about this individualizing drive and interprets them as related efforts to make literature and critical theory better fit post-Fordist paradigms (see section 2.5). A survey of the postcritical discourse sets up this discussion.

2.4. Postcritique: "Disenchanted with Disenchantment"

Critical theory has recently witnessed a surge of re-evaluations of scholarly methods that shares central aspects with the shift in literary aesthetic described above. Under the rubric of postcritique, numerous scholars seem to echo the authors discussed in section 2.2 in their suggestion to reorient critical practices guided by detachment and suspicion, such as ideology critique, toward more intuitive and open-minded encounters with fiction. Following Nancy Bentley, one can safely assert that—true to the logic of reflexive modernization—at least some quarters of "literary and cultural studies [have] become disenchanted with disenchantment" (291).

Given the passionate debate postcritique has provoked amidst a "sense of crisis in the humanities" (Anker and Felski 20), it has certainly hit a nerve. Felski's work in particular has received enormous attention: In addition to several journal forums—*PMLA* (132.2, March 2017), *Religion and Literature* (48.2, Fall 2018), and *American Literary History* (31.2, Summer 2019)—various journalistic articles attest to attention outside the discipline (J. J. Williams; Parry). Among her numerous reviewers are the likes of Terry Eagleton and Bruce Robbins, the latter perhaps postcritique's most vocal opponent. Furthermore, postcritique by now resonates across disciplines in fields such pedagogy (Bittner and Wischmann) and international relations (Austin et al.).

Although Bruno Latour worked outside of literary studies, his influential polemic against "critique" as well as "actor-network-theory" (ANT), co-developed by him, have left their mark on postcritique and particularly on Felski's work. Therefore, the following section first introduces his widely cited intervention (section 2.4.1) before then discussing Felski's work as well as Best and Marcus' "surface reading" (sections 2.4.2 and 2.4.3). After surveying some of postcritique's historical predecessors (section 2.4.4), this chapter closes with a discussion of postcritique's and New Sincerity's shared longing for intimacy. As this chapter eventually shows in section 2.5, postcritique's implied concern to rethink scholarly knowledge production under contemporary post-Fordism might explains its wide-ranging and passionate reception.

2.4.1. Critique, a Conspiracy Theory? (Bruno Latour)

In a polemic of 2004, Latour asks "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" and laments that critical thought has not only lost its emancipatory edge but, worse, has meanwhile been appropriated by conspiracy theorists and other dubious actors: Natural science's empiricism and the humanities' critical rhetoric have been taken up in distorted terms by climate change deniers who prevent political action by (ab)using scientific registers to claim that global warming has not been proven conclusively (225). Latour asks whether the once powerful mode of critique has been consumed by its offspring and claims that intellectuals, after years of thinking of themselves as society's "vanguard", are now "one war late" (227). The rise of conspiracy theories, he argues, is not a misuse of the otherwise neutral toolset of critical theory but has at least in part been fueled by the endemic simplifications practiced in its name. As official accounts of a given event are immediately called into question through "*instant revisionism*," Latour pointedly hypothesizes

about parallels between a conspiracist and critical mindset (228, original emphasis): In "both cases, you have to learn to become suspicious of everything people say because of course we all know that they live in the thralls of a complete *illusio* of their real motives." Moreover, both perspectives articulate "the same appeal to powerful agents hidden in the dark acting always consistently, continuously, relentlessly" (229).

Latour's contention that a vaguely defined critique was disseminated widely from its academic centers to the general public in the last decades is dubious. In (some) departments of French, English and Comparative Literature, French Theory might have taken on a special role, yet hardly any humanities faculty has ever been dominated by poststructuralism (Cusset 76–106). Equally, a majority in the fields of philosophy and the social sciences held an at least reserved view on poststructuralist theories (93–98). If one accepts Latour's conjecture nevertheless, it is fairly uncontroversial: The large-scale *quantitative* expansion of a certain method frequently entails *qualitative* changes. Many influential theories have been appropriated differently and in accordance with specific times and places. Such disassembly and reassembly of critical theory is well-studied. But it remains questionable whether ambiguous side-effects like the simplifications and revisions accompanying such adaptions should be unidirectionally attributed to the theory itself. Conceived of instead as an instance of reflexive modernization, the dynamic decried by Latour is less controversial. Transformations of such scale frequently cause unforeseen side-effects that gradually gain influence and eventually become dominant. To recall Beck, successful paradigms can destabilize themselves. Seen through this lens, the widespread (mis)appropriation of empirical and critical methods by regressive political forces is paradoxically an indicator of their success. In an important difference to Latour, however, the notion of reflexive modernization reflects upon historical transformations and thus grounds the contingency of critique in its context (cf. Robbins, "Critical").

Latour's linking of critical theory to conspiracy theories is careless. By positing the latter as more extreme, though fundamentally related, versions of the former, Latour's essay takes on the very conspiratorial murmur he bemoans. The result is an ironic discrepancy between Latour's call for minute description of the world's complexities and the polemical register he employs when discussing 'bad' practices of critique throughout the text. For an overhaul of critique in the sense that he advocates would presuppose a thorough examination of the objects and practices he seeks

to improve. The association of "critique" with the rise of conspiracy theories and the political instrumentalizations of scientific methods is one example of Latour's errors. He first claims a connection between academia and political regression to then use this (unsubstantiated) association against the premises of critical theory. For this claim, Latour's idiosyncratic use of "critique" is central.

Bruce Robbins notes that Latour likens critique to paranoia, a pathological connotation enabling the link between a critical and a conspiracist mindset ("Critical"). Only by caricaturing any conventional definition of "critique," defined by the OED as "[t]he art or practice of analysing, evaluating, and commenting on the qualities and character of something" ("critique, n."), can Latour make his point. Although his essay's tone implies a near-universality of the "critical barbarity" he laments, Latour eschews to name any concrete instances of critical excesses or specific authors. His insistence on the temporal proximity between critique being 'fashionable' and its supposed descendants in conspiracy theories is similarly questionable; both the targeted sabotage of scientific discourse and conspiracy theories have a long history.[10] Conspiracy theories have certainly gained more attention since the essay's publication, but Latour's discussion of them remains inadequate. Michael Butter lists three axioms that underlie most conspiracy theories: First of all, nothing happens by chance, (because) everything is planned by the malevolent conspirators; secondly, nothing is what it appears to be, the important issues are secret and, lastly, everything is connected and part of a masterplan (22–23). Consider how Latour equates this conspiracist logic with "critique" in the following passage on discussing the 9/11 attacks with his neighbor:

> What has become of critique when my neighbor in the little Bourbonnais village where I live looks down on me as someone hopelessly naïve because I believe that the United States had been attacked by terrorists? […] I am now the one who naïvely believes in some facts because I am educated, while the other guys are too unsophisticated to be gullible: 'Where have you been? Don't you know that the Mossad and the CIA did it?' (228)

His neighbor blames a not coincidentally Jewish secret service, together with an American equivalent, for the 9/11 attacks. Only in Latour's distorted sense of the term can his neighbor's antisemitic quip count as "critique." Moreover, Latour's tacit premise of conspiracy theories' rise remains questionable, for as Butter asserts in his historical survey, we are not living in the golden

[10] A fitting example for the latter is the tobacco industry's effort throughout the twentieth century to undercut the emerging scientific consensus about the health risks of smoking through studies in its favor. A growing body of scholarship illuminates the tobacco industry's efforts to protect its profitable market (Davis; Keating).

age of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories might play a notable role in the current public sphere, yet he emphasizes that this is not to be taken for their discursive success. After all, these myths need to be engaged in order to be refuted (and eventually stigmatized) by evidence-based reasoning (Butter 16–17; 151–69).

Despite its feeble argumentation, Latour's intervention has received attention in many fields and is widely cited as an example for widespread dissatisfaction with Theory. His thoughts impinge twofold on Felski's work. On the one side, he inspired her growing skepticism toward the routines of critique; on the other, his ANT offers her an alternative way of theorizing literature.

2.4.2. Bored with Critique (Rita Felski)

In recent years, literary theory has witnessed the questioning of some of the discipline's prevalent methods. This "postcritical" line of thought is a theoretical self-re-evaluation by scholars who, like Latour and Felski, have built careers on approaches whose usefulness they now question. This trajectory is indicated by Felski's *The Limits of Critique* of 2015. She addresses similar questions in *Hooked* of 2020, *Critique and Postcritique*, co-edited with Elizabeth Anker in 2017, as well as her 2008 *The Uses of Literature*. In the latter, she argues that during the previous decades critics developed a more or less uniform and self-satisfied attitude of suspicion that accommodates an idealized image of a detached and shrewd scholar rather than the individual complexity of a given text, thus frequently foreclosing a meaningful engagement with it. The skepticism toward surfaces and appearances on display in the influential writings of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Sigmund Freud, dubbed the "school of suspicion" by Paul Ricœur, might have inspired many. But Felski states, it gradually lost its appeal:

> We know only too well the well-oiled machine of ideology critique, the x-ray gaze of symptomatic reading, the smoothly rehearsed moves that add up to a hermeneutics of suspicion. Ideas that seemed revelatory thirty years ago—the decentered subject! the social construction of reality!—have dwindled into shopworn slogans; defamiliarizing has lapsed into doxa, no less dogged and often as dogmatic as the certainties it sought to disrupt (1).

Conversely, she presents her approach as an open-minded and pragmatic exploration of what literature can achieve: "Is it possible to discuss the value of literature without falling into truisms and platitudes, sentimentality and *Schwärmerei*?" (22). Aware that her argument sits in-between established traditions of reader-response theory on the one hand and a Harold Bloomian aestheticism on the other, Felski is at pains to present her proposal as both distinct from older

approaches and relevant for the future of literary studies. Throughout *The Uses of Literature*, Felski reiterates what she does not want: neither a de-politicization of art (7) nor an anti-intellectual dichotomy between scholarly and conventional reading practices (14–16). *The Limits of Critique* similarly concludes with a list of positions that Felski seeks to move away from (190–93).

Felski focuses on phenomenology, but explicitly distances herself from both the Geneva and the Constance School, citing what she sees as their bias toward a "notably one-sided ideal of the academic or professional reader" and its dismissal of the varied affective reactions of individual readers (*Uses* 16). Although formulating a neophenomenological approach to explore "micro-aesthetics" (18, 133), she wants to avoid celebrating arbitrary reading practices. Her intention "is not a populist defense of folk reading over scholarly interpretation," but an illumination of "certain affective and cognitive parameters" that they share (14). In this way, her four titular "Uses" of literature—"Recognition," "Knowledge," "Enchantment," and "Shock"—mark an attempt to bridge the growing gap between academic treatments of literature and everyday reading practices.

With regards to recognition, Felski laments psychoanalysis' dismissal of the complex and continuous process to recognize oneself or others in literary narratives (27–28). In contrast to the Lacanian view that sees such efforts as naïve and necessarily flawed, Felski rehabilitates the concept in its "imperfect or incomplete" state that nevertheless remains a vital part of the reading experience (42). Concerning the category of knowledge, she similarly questions the orthodoxy of Marxist ideology critique that, to her mind, holds the dogma that "literary texts are unable to know themselves adequately" and that only the diagnostic gaze of their suspicious reader brings to the fore their 'real' meaning (80). Felski pleads for a pragmatic treatment of literary knowledge by suggesting that it should not be subjected to a form of epistemological competition with knowledge deriving from critical theory. Instead, the latter's diagnostic skills and the former's "context-sensitive knowledge […] achieved through artful means" ought to be appreciated for their respective strengths and productively combined (92–93).

Another "use" of literature lies in "enchantment;" "a state of intense involvement, a sense of being so entirely caught up in an aesthetic object that nothing else seems to matter" (54). For Felski, enchantment neither entails passivity nor a lack of critical distance. Rather, these immersive states of "modern enchantment" are

> those in which we are immersed but not submerged, bewitched but not beguiled, suspensions of disbelief that do not lose sight of the fictiveness of those fictions that enthrall us. Such enchantments are magical without requiring the intervention of the supernatural, reminders of the persistence of the mysterious, wondrous, and perplexing in a rationalized and at least partly secularized world (75).

This insistence on deep but not overwhelming affection, on not losing control or at least staying a conscious reader, also guides Felski's thoughts regarding "shock." Once more, she identifies a gap between academic reading practices and their everyday equivalent. In opposition to the view that shock has become a routine device of the culture industry and has gradually canceled itself out, Felski argues that irrespective of how many times shock has been proclaimed dead, audiences of diverse backgrounds attest to its impact on a regular basis (107; 130).

In *The Limits of Critique*, Felski inverts the perspective and shifts the focus from what literature *can* do to what scholars should *not* do. She defines critique as a whole array of "varying hues and shades of meaning," the most important ones being a pervasive attitude of skepticism or condemnation, a self-ascribed political effort against "overbearing and oppressive social forces" as well as an accompanying radicalism, "and the assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *un*critical" (2, original emphasis). With regards to the prevailing ways in which literature affects readers of various backgrounds—"the novel that convinced you to take up Buddhism or to get divorced" (167)—she reorients literary studies away from what she perceives of as critique's dead ends. Felski insists that she does not reject critique but seeks to map its conceptual blind spots and contradictions: "what if critique were limited, not limitless; if it were finite and fallible; if we conceded that it does some things well and other things poorly or not at all?" (*Limits* 8). Felski's rhetoric echoes Wallace's case against postmodernist skepticism when she decries the routinized and formulaic execution of some well-known critical move that merely perpetuates the "antinormative normativity: skepticism as dogma" (9). In further congeniality with Wallace, she instead advocates for a revitalization of interpretation as an exciting encounter, a new kind of relationship to literary media that might help the discipline to survive amidst institutional pressure (10). Themselves facing "accelerating skepticism" about their utility "in a market-driven age," the humanities struggle to hold their ground and literary studies are particularly hard-pressed to justify themselves: "Why, after all, should anyone care about literature?" (14). Felski formulates her answer by theorizing the "micro-aesthetics" quoted above through ANT. She argues that literary texts ought not to be reduced to their historical contexts and instead be seen as transhistorical agents. Furthermore, texts can be conceptualized as non-human actors that, much

like their readers, are never solitary but in a perpetually evolving discourse with their network (156–78).[11]

Felski approvingly cites Marielle Macé and Yves Citton, whose hermeneutical perspective seeks a compromise, according to which a text is "no longer a monument to dead thought (*histoire*) nor a self-referential web of linguistic signs (*écriture*)" (*Limits* 175, original emphasis). Given the infinite possibilities of interactions between reader and text that follow from this conceptualization, Winfried Fluck asks if and how literary studies can actually examine such complex encounters. Would critics have to exchange their tools for those of other disciplines and conduct ethnographic studies or computational analysis to do justice to the intricate networks generated by the supposedly simple act of reading ("Limits" 233)? Fluck observes that the act of interpretation becomes problematic in Felski's work: One half of the encounter, the literary text, cannot speak on its own and the reader, constituting the other half, might not grasp the complexity of the interaction at hand. As a consequence, the interpreter, though disguised in the network, rises to importance once again (235).

Through her adoption of ANT, Felski circumvents not only the potential methodological conundrums that the emphasis on complexity entails but also bypasses the time-worn question of agency and determination. As ANT grants equal degrees of agency to every "coactor," the readers included, Felski can 'rescue' them from the weak position of perpetual subjection assigned to them by what she sees as critique's formulaic and unconvincing uses. Conversely, she awards readers agency through unpredictable and uncontrollable affective attachments without, as Fluck puts it, "putting the subject back into the driver's seat" (235). However elegant this move might appear, ANT is not in fact a zero-sum game: "Since the critic would have a hard time tracing all of the 'many ties' that contribute to the reading experience, she will have to make choices—choices shaped by the story she wants to tell" (Fluck, "Limits" 235). Even the most complex network has to be defined by somebody. Yet the emphasis on readers' volatile affective reactions helps Felski to promote her argument against the routinization—and for the revitalization—of the reading process:

[11] Primarily developed by Latour, John Law and Michel Callon, this social theory posits that society is the sum of ever-changing associations (or networks) between equal actors. Within ANT, there is no 'outside,' all actors, be they human or non-human, are defined by their constantly changing connections.

> The reader, shaken out of her routine and brought back to life, has regained her singularity, one that, contrary to the formulaic practice of *critique*, can no longer be trapped in a predictable plot. Singularity is the normative base of an approach that aims to escape routinization (Fluck, "Limits" 238, original emphasis).

Felski elevates the unique encounter between reader and text in the act of reading to scholarly attention. Since its routinization has damaged critique beyond repair for her, Felski also distances herself from those who want to 'reform' it (*Limits* 81–82). But her demarcations leave a palpable gap between her personal view and the trajectory of her argument, so that the central question of her intervention remains open: "what is actually wrong, beyond [Felski's] personal grievances with 'banality' or 'predictability', with trying to recognise what cultural and political acclimatisation might have blinded us to" (Terrell 790)? If critique is in the crisis Felski proclaims it is, the postcritical alternatives she presents are just that, alternatives. Arguably, her evident concern about the disciplinary future of literary studies overshadows the methodological dimension. She is not primarily concerned with methodological debates and instead investigates how to increase literary studies' appeal as a discipline. This explains why her articulation of ideas that have been put forth in the past with astonishing similarity, receive such widespread attention. Before such predecessors are discussed, however, the following section introduces another of postcritique's strands, "surface reading."

2.4.3. The Text Says It All Itself (Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus)

A 2009 special issue of *Representations* on "The Way We Read Now" assembled approaches intent on overcoming the suspicions or symptomatic readings of the Marxist and psychoanalytic kind (1). Unlike Latour and Felski, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus identify the target of their intervention in Fredric Jameson. They question whether symptomatic reading—examining a text's manifest surface to then interpret it as a symptom for latent meanings—remains useful today and instead propose to return to textual surfaces. In one of their propositions, literary texts always mediate themselves: whatever a theoretically inspired reading can contribute to a text is always already present in it: "Description sees no need to translate the text into a theoretical or historical metalanguage in order to make the text meaningful. The purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself" (11). This "modest" line of inquiry links their argument to both Latour and Felski.

Best and Marcus begin by restating Jameson's train of thought: In *The Political Unconscious* of 1981, he states that "[i]f everything were transparent, then no ideology would be

possible, and no domination either," which is why a literary critic could never accept that "the text means just what it says" (46, 45; qtd. in Best and Marcus 2). The assumption that "domination can only do its work when veiled," Best and Marcus write, might have sounded paranoid in the past. But after eight years of the second Bush administration, they note, it "has a nostalgic, even utopian ring to it" (2). The shocking but openly accessible images of torture in Abu Ghraib and the abandonment of the mostly black victims of Hurricane Katrina on live television, "may have hammered home the point that not all situations require the subtle ingenuity associated with symptomatic reading" (2). It would be uncontroversial to question whether symptomatic reading is a universal remedy, but Best and Marcus openly relate their argument to a shifting political context. Although their likening of the "Bush regime" to "nascent fascism" indicates an at least imprecise political vocabulary (2), fifteen years later their grievances have yet another "nostalgic ring" to them. Like Latour's and Felski's, their intervention reveals itself to be not entirely concerned with methodological concerns. Instead, it reconsiders the cliché-ridden relationship between scholarship and politics.[12] Whereas "it had become common for literary scholars to equate their work with political activism" during Best and Marcus' time in graduate school, they now maintain that "literary criticism alone is not sufficient to effect change" (2) and call for a "a sense of political realism about the revolutionary capacities of both texts and critics" (15–16).

The belief in such a link between academic critique and progress, even revolution, is naïve to say the least. Moreover, its implied understanding of the "university as a good in itself, an institution defined ultimately by the progressive nature at its core" (Boggs and Mitchell 434), ignores the many exclusions which were constitutive both for the US university in general as well as literary studies in particular (Hines; Guillory). However unsound it may be, the history of cultural studies, the influential strand of literary studies that it inspired this long-held fascination with revolutionary politics, helps contextualize this aspect. Fluck provides an overview of how different schools have over time repeatedly shifted their focus in the hope of finding hitherto overlooked sources of resistance against modernity's ever-intensifying grasp. Initially, Matthew Arnold and later T.W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer believed that the demanding realms of high

[12] Although he does not share the implied liberalism prevalent in the postcritical discourse, Joseph North offers a similar diagnosis. In *Literary Criticism*, he maintains that precisely those "scholars" adhering to the supposedly radical "'historicist/contextualist' paradigm" have gradually retreated into academic professionalism and thus eschewed the kind of "programmatic commitment to using works of literature for the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility, with the goal of more general cultural and political change" that characterizes "criticism" for North (1–3).

art possess subversive residues ("Resistance!" 15–16). This approach was subsequently dismissed as elitist by a variety of scholars, notably Raymond Williams, who conversely praised the working class's entire way of life as defending the reservoir of solidarity against modernity's individualizing drive. These hopes were in turn repeatedly disappointed "when the working class ignored [the] offer" of re-empowerment as theorized by Williams and later the Birmingham School as well as a young Michel Foucault (21).

Disaffected, Foucault theorized internalized power in *Discipline and Punish*, a notion that no longer held the possibility of an independent interiority or even unconsciousness. Judith Butler revised this bleak assessment by pointing to momentary possibilities of resignification which, however fleeting, can trouble the discursive power. Her work aligns with a larger shift from "class politics to a new politics of cultural difference" (20). Yet another reorientation addressed the resulting problem of individualization soon after: If everyone must find momentary and individual ways of resisting an all-pervasive power, has collective action become impossible? For Fluck, the search for resistance within Cultural Studies has recently come full circle and returned to the aesthetic categories that Arnold, Adorno and Horkheimer emphasized. But instead of focusing on high culture, attention is now placed on the previously "neglected potential for resistance in popular cultural forms and in the experience of everyday life" (23). This belief in the relevance of everyday practices has an equally long tradition and, in the American context, dates back to at least John Dewey (23). Best and Marcus' call for trust in textual surfaces and Felski's corresponding valorization of lay reading indicate this turn toward the everyday as well as a reorientation away from the frustrating search for subversion.

The postcritical impetus moreover aligns itself with the kind of fiction surveyed in the first section. Before the concluding section (2.5) discusses these commonalities in more detail, one can summarize that, like New Sincerity fiction, postcritique strives for a de-hierarchized relationship between reader and text. Neither a canonized work of high art nor a well-studied critic is supposed to gain high ground over the other. As a result, this relationship of equals can be shaped as an imaginative and intimate exchange, bringing to the fore the experiential and affective dimensions of reading. Such affinities for "affective intensities" clearly resonate with current labor paradigms, especially with post-Fordism's penchant for flat hierarchies and the rise of knowledge work. Before

surveying these connections more closely, however, a review of postcritique's intellectual ancestors helps to historicize the current discourse.

2.4.4. Postcritical Predecessors

Notwithstanding Felski's insistence on the contrary (*Uses* 21, *Limits* 9, 192, "Both/And" 252), her work—and postcritique in its entirety—necessarily amounts to a critique of critique (Terrell 789; cf. Robbins, "Not" 371). Best and Marcus as well as Felski all state that they seek no complete overhaul of critique but a reorientation, and interventions of this kind may indeed be something of an academic trademark: Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels' "Against Theory" of 1982, Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* of 2003 and Johanna Drucker's 2005 *Sweet Dreams*, an attack against critics holding on to the "dim flame" of the avant-garde primarily to "cultivate a self-styled radical chic" (xiv), all attest to critique's self-reflexive habit to turn its critical rigor against itself. In this regard, Susan Sontag's 1964 polemic "Against Interpretation" is postcritique's clearest forerunner (Best and Marcus 10), which concludes with the proclamation that "[in] place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (14). Sontag, an unmistakable precursor of the postcritical charge against the constraints of routinized critique, writes:

> In most modern instances, interpretation amounts to the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone. Real art has the capacity to make us nervous. By reducing the work of art to its content and then interpreting *that*, one tames the work of art. Interpretation makes art manageable, comfortable (8, original emphasis).

The reference to "real art['s]" capacity to "make us nervous," to provoke overwhelming reactions, clearly intersects with Felski's interest in literature's "enchanting" or "shocking" affects. The artwork's subsequent reduction to a "manageable, comfortable" scale likewise resonates with Felski's palpable dissatisfaction with critique's routinization. Given their congruence, the most revealing aspect about Felski's and Sontag's arguments is their unequal reception. The kind of interpretation Sontag argued against—"Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?" (5)—was to gain only more momentum in the following decades. Already at the time of writing, Sontag's plea for close readings had passed its academic acme in the form of New Criticism. Conversely, Felski has clearly hit a nerve.

A more recent inspiration for the postcritical discourse is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay on "paranoid reading and reparative reading." A trailblazer of queer studies, Sedgwick had relied on paranoid reading (her term for a hermeneutics of suspicion) for most of her career. She

contemplates its scholarly success—in addition to her own work embodied by Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* and the works of Jameson and Edward Said, for example—and deliberates this success' corrosive side-effects. The sweeping "critical habits" belonging to this mindset may, she speculates, "have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller" (124). In addition, the shifting cultural context demands a corresponding shift in the scholarly approach. Sedgwick anticipates much of Best and Marcus' argument about the openly accessible horrors of the current political system when she asks: "Why bother exposing the ruses of power in a country where, at any given moment, 40 percent of young black men are enmeshed in the penal system" (140)? Yet she is careful not to dismiss paranoid reading and rather pleads for a methodologically diverse approach that includes reparative reading's embrace of affective attachments. Postcritique is frequently accused of tilting Sedgwick's balanced deliberation in its favor and of ignoring her continued commitment to the "paranoid viewpoint," especially its utility for marginalized groups or individuals (Robbins, "Reading"; cf. Emre 253–57). Yet there are palpable parallels: like postcritique, Sedgwick views suspicion to have become too dominant, sees some familiar methods of critique as inadequate in a society that openly displays its violent character and advocates for a rescaling of literary studies. By highlighting the (often ignored) potentials of positive affect and individual attachment, she also makes the case for a shift from global to local issues. In a crucial difference, however, Sedgwick never established a hierarchy between these approaches and instead was at pains to show that, depending on the context, each "had its place" in the critic's toolbox (Fleissner, "Romancing" 116).

Other postcritical forerunners include Michael Warner, whose "Uncritical Reading" gets cited frequently in postcritical debates, and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Although the latter is not part of the discourse, his explorations of hermeneutic reasoning and its limits resonate similarly. Another kindred spirit would surely make many of its proponents uncomfortable, yet postcritique shares some of its targets with "the first shot in the culture wars" (Paglia in Bawer 15), Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*. Despite palpable differences, Bloom and the postcritical discourse both trace the humanities' sense of institutional crisis back to the same thinkers and methods: Marx and Freud, poststructuralism and deconstruction (Luft 219–20; vol. 1). The call to replace suspicious scholarship with an open-minded (or even open-hearted) approach to literature is therefore quite old. Why then does postcritique's rehashing gain so much attention?

Patricia Stuelke suggests that the reparative mode bloomed in the late twentieth century because it consoled a sense of powerlessness in the face of excessive state violence that appeared unyielding to critique (13). The following section uses a somewhat narrower focus to posit that postcritique's attention to relational shifts in this particular knowledge work explains its discursive timeliness.

2.5. New Sincerity and Postcritique: A Good Team[13]

Recalling the communicative impetus of the fiction discussed at the outset, a clear correspondence with postcritique emerges. Literary authors attempt to overcome a dissatisfaction with poststructural theory and its perceived dead ends: Exasperated by postmodernism's signature stance of playful detachment, they seek to reclaim trust in language's connecting potential and the subject's ontological stability. As a last short example makes clear, New Sincerity texts mobilize a rhetoric of transparency and proclaim to work toward an empathetic relationship with the reader. At the end of Dave Eggers's *What Is the What*, a fictionalized biography of the refugee Valentino Achak Deng, the narrator seemingly addresses the reader directly: "I will tell stories to people who will listen and to people who don't want to listen, to people who seek me out and to those who run. All the while I will know that you are there. How can I pretend that you do not exist? It would be almost as impossible as you pretending that I do not exist" (475). Evidently, the "drive towards inter-subjective connection and communication" (Timmer 13) needs no textual excavation, it is right on the surface. If the readers take seriously New Sincerity's rhetoric of trust, it is essential that they do not engage in critique, do not "dig deep" into or "stand back" from the text to retrieve something hidden or to defamiliarize their perspective (Felski, *Limits* 52–84). Suspicious attitudes would only prevent the texts' outreach, deflect their communicative effort and sabotage the entire literary and ethical project.

As if reacting directly to New Sincerity's offer, postcritique advocates for an intuitive approach to textual surfaces and an embrace of one's affective reactions. Best and Marcus' "surface reading" is the clearest example, as their humble aim to "indicate what the text says about itself" expresses the very trust New Sincerity asks of its readers (11). Felski's preference for a ballet reference is similarly illustrative: She compares the act of reading to a "'pas de deux,' an interplay

[13] A condensed version of the sections discussing the compatibility between postcritique and New Sincerity appeared as "US-Amerikanische Literaturwissenschaft im Postfordismus: New Sincerity trifft Postkritik" in *Verabschiedungen der "Postmoderne": Neuere Historisierungen von "Theorie" zwischen "Post-Truth"-Narrativen und Generationen-geschichte,* edited by Florian Scherübl, transcript Verlag, 2022, pp. 45–66.

between text and person that refuses the false choice of autonomous aesthetics or instrumental politics" (*Limits* 176). When reading is conceived of as a dance, the importance of an intimate understanding is obvious. Only when both partners lead and follow, give and receive impulses, in short: *trust each other*, will the choreography result in the "spirit of dialogue and constructiveness" that both New Sincerity and postcritique valorize (Anker and Felski 16). In short, the commonalities between postcritique and New Sincerity are substantive: Reviewing the reading process from both ends, they promote the establishment of (and confidence in) a sincere relationship between reader and text that rejects aesthetic obfuscation by formal means as well as critical distance and instead emphasizes accessibility. True to the spirit of the reparative turn, reader and text are trusting partners cooperating with the aim of creating a common realm, a shared intimacy.

By conceiving of the reading process as cooperative, the 'labors of reading' appear to be divided. In the terminology of ANT, this notion of partnership implies an anti-hierarchical revision of reading milieus, an equation of professional and lay readers. Examining what a given text is hiding might indeed be a hindrance. As postcritic Mitchum Huehls puts it: "Post-symptomatic reading methods aren't enough; we must also appreciate the burgeoning body of contemporary literature asking to be read post-symptomatically" (167). Unlike the oppositional attitude that Felski decries, reading is understood here as a cooperative process created by equals. This focus on the in-between relates to what affect theory calls "affective intensities." Mühlhoff and Slaby define this term in relation to how a riveting affective arrangement contrasts with its surroundings,

> so that entering into an affective arrangement comes with a notable change in the degree and intensity with which a person affectively 'resonates' […] the tangle of affective relations on the inside of such constellations is intense and 'gripping' as opposed to the lower intensity on their outside (160).

The term "immersion" designates an amplification of such intensities and describes a spectrum of experiences ranging "from uneasiness, to absorption, up to the complete amalgamation of one's temporary 'being' within an intensive meshwork of augmenting or diminishing, positive or negative affective relations" (160). This description shares much with how postcritique pursues intimacy with literary texts. Postcritique puts faith in literature's ability to provide unique experiences and connections, in how reading a novel can change your life. In this view, the potential for such experiences is available to everyone, if one only brings along an open and believing attitude.

Mühlhoff and Slaby's discussion of "affect and power in post-Fordist work cultures" indicate that such Neoromanticism resonates with today's ideal of collaborative work arrangements. The teamwork advocated by postcritique and New Sincerity is an attempt to review the status and utility of literature under post-Fordism. The sociological backdrop developed above helps to identify the correlation among, on the one side, postcritique and New Sincerity's joint call for dialogue, the move away from routinized critique and the emphasis on singular reading experiences. On the other, it contextualizes postcritique's urgent rhetoric about literary studies' pervasive "legitimation crisis" with which Felski frames her entire intervention (*Limits* 5). Amidst growing pressure on literary institutions, she argues, postcritique's attention to individual relationship between reader and text opens new ways to justify the study of literature by disposing critique's routine moves. In a society that increasingly values positivistic knowledge, scholars ought to emphasize literature's exhilarating aspects (*Uses* 2). This marks yet another affinity to the antimodernist longing for "authentic experience" which was, according to Lears' account of the American *fin de siècle*, rooted in a "crisis of moral authority" similar to the one the humanities have experienced in recent decades (5). But, in antimodernist tradition (see section 2.1.1), Felski et al. neglect to investigate the actual causes for this crisis. Instead of investigating, for example, "how the university became neoliberal" (Seal; cf. Newfield, *Great*) and if rising "student debt […] drove people out of the English department" (Brouillette, "Reading"), they proclaim a link between the humanities' institutional decline and their supposed methodological shortcomings. As Sheila Liming summarizes: "Felski's right in feeling that something is amiss, but wrong in thinking that *thing* is criticism or scholarship itself. The problems that plague humanities scholars today are not attitudinal but, in fact, grossly material" (original emphasis). Ironically, Felski's frantic search for ways to make literary studies attractive once more merely mimics the instrumental logic of marketing that has devalued the humanities in the first place. In other words, Felski undercuts the "persuasive defense of the humanities" she herself demands (*Limits* 186). Her personal success in fundraising might prove her right about how literary studies can survive (Parry), but it also poses questions about how much the discipline will have to change.

Although Felski mostly ignores her forerunner's intervention, by seeking to replace the dull administration of texts by authority figures with a reading mode that stresses literature's exciting potentials for anyone who dares, she effectively renews Sontag's version of the "artistic critique." Considering the recent transformation of scholarly ideal types as studied by Robert Niemann (who

is apparently unaware of "postcritique" in literary studies), Felski's suggestion bespeaks a change from "critical knowledge creation to postcritical self-management" (9–18). Additionally, by replacing expertise with experience, postcritique converts the literary critic's workplace "from one that requires a skilled worker […] to one that does not"—the OED's definition of "deskilling." Felski et al. see this development as first and foremost democratizing: Untroubled by requirements of, for example, a given text's form, language or ideological affinities, virtually anyone can dare such entrepreneurial reading: Freed from critique's predictable trajectories (Kelleter 166), the reader engages in a self-assured exchange with the text. It may appear exaggerated to liken postcritique to an instance of Schumpeter's "creative destruction" on the volatile market of academic thought. But the comparison reveals how, in accordance with Boltanski and Chiapello's *New Spirit of Capitalism*, postcritique puts pressure on established approaches to literature by presenting an exciting and singularizing way of reading designed to appeal to everyone and frighten no one.

It remains doubtful how much freedom or innovation lies in this prospect. Lay readers have always been able to read texts in whatever way they liked, and these practices have rightfully garnered analytical attention for some time now (e.g. Radway). But postcritique mimics the rhetoric of (self)help and consumer discourses and "seems likely to produce a criticism that is closer to fandom" (Robbins, "Critical"). In this sense, postcritique also bespeaks an end-of-history sentiment of acquiescence toward that which is already given, an outlook Walter Benn Michaels has noted decades ago. When all emphasis is put on the subjective, readers may "differ, but they don't disagree […] because they have nothing to disagree about" (80). But for what reason should professional readers give up their register of critique—however heterogenous—and join book clubs? It stays unclear what postcritique actually looks like in practice since its proponents "have a difficult time describing their methodologies in anything other than metaphors and abstractions, promises and aspirations" (Emre 255). Studies like David Alworth's *Site Reading* might be exceptions to this rule. Lee Konstantinou notes that the book actually "practices the new mode of reading it also proposes" and enacts the very mode of object-oriented reading which postcritique advocates ("Review" 1). Yet according to Tucker-Abramson's scathing review, this only exacerbates the problems with post-critique ("Make"). While the debate about postcritique will, alas, go on for some time, the following four chapters meanwhile utilize some of the very

"shopworn slogans" Felski is bored of, above all Jameson's call to "[a]lways historicize!" (*Political* 9).

3. "Quality Time" with David: *The Pale King*'s Emotional Economy[14]

> If you followed the kinds of things people said and wrote in those first weeks after Wallace's death, you noticed a recurring theme: people said, I felt like I knew him.
>
> Christopher Hager. Preface to "On Speculation: *Infinite Jest* and American Fiction after Postmodernism."

Section 2.2 has already indicated Wallace's towering status regarding the literature under consideration here. Marshall Boswell coins the term *The Wallace Effect* for "the mixture of envy, hagiography, and resentment that has come to mark Wallace's presence in the contemporary literary imagination" and, as indicated, numerous contemporary writers connect to Wallace in one way or another (1). There has been a recent increase in scholarly critiques,[15] but the essays, monographs and edited volumes forming "Wallace Studies" remain generally admiring. Hungerford's contrarian polemic deriding the glorification of "Saint Dave" is a notable exception (*Making* 147), but academics and journalists generally continue to celebrate Wallace.

Scholars credit him with recalibrating the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, irony and sincerity, in fiction after postmodernism (Holland, *Succeeding*; Timmer). A section of the field focuses on "postirony," a term that connotes a conscious use of ironic aesthetics while curbing the attitudinal and ideological implications that led Wallace to see postmodernism as morally detached and cynical (Konstantinou, *Cool;* Hoffmann). Others address Wallace's philosophical insights and influences (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable;* Bolger and Korb; Cahn), religious themes in his writing (A. S. Miller) and his connections to world literature (L. Thompson, *Global Wallace*). Some even seek links between Wallace and the European modernist canon (Halfmann). Notably, Wallace's posthumous fame is driven not exclusively by scholarly appreciation but by media outlets that list "Great David Foster Wallace Quotes" (Lockner), remember him as an inspiring teacher (Barnett)

---

[14] A condensed version of this chapter appeared as "'Quality Time' with David Foster Wallace: *The Pale King*'s Emotional Economy" in Ramírez, J. Jesse, and Sixta Quaßdorf, editors. *Work: The Labors of Language, Culture, and History in North America*. Narr Francke Attempto, 2021, pp. 35–51.

[15] Holland interrogates the limited gender conceptions in Wallace's oeuvre and those devoted to study it ("By Hirsute Author," discussed in 3.3), Jackson and Nicholson-Roberts critique *Infinite Jest*'s narrow representational scope, Araya does the same for *The Pale King*. For opinion pieces deliberating Wallace's role as "lit-bro shorthand" or his relationships to women, see Molly Fisher and L. Marsh.

or recommend books that Wallace (might have) read himself (Nelson-Teutsch). The cultural phenomenon "DFW" has transcended both author and oeuvre, enabling one to know—and like—Wallace without ever having to read him (Hayes-Brady in Paulson).

Before delving into *The Pale King*, it is useful to highlight the teamwork that went into its creation. After Wallace's death in 2008, the text's arrangement necessarily went far beyond the publishing industry's conventional division of labor. Wallace's long-term editor Michael Pietsch at Little, Brown & Co was left with no "outline or other indication of what order [Wallace] intended" and subsequently assembled and sequenced the fragments that make up *The Pale King* on his own (x–xi). In the editor's note preceding the novel, Pietsch recounts the process of arranging what is "not by any measure a finished work" (xi): "As I read these [unorganized] chapters I felt unexpected joy, because while inside this world that David had made I felt as if I were in his presence, and was able to forget awhile the awful fact of his death" (x). Pietsch's joy is not in question; tied to Wallace by years of collaboration, he mourned the loss of a friend and a writer who he clearly considered ingenious. Yet his remarks show how Wallace's texts can blur the lines between *reading* and *being with* the author, therefore creating the very sense of presence constitutive for intimacy (Wilner).

Pietsch employs this perceived immediacy to argue that the text at hand is not only "an astonishingly full novel, created with superabundant originality" (x). Furthermore, its fragmentary character and the remaining imperfections reinforce *The Pale King*'s authenticity because Wallace, "a perfectionist of the highest order," would have "resisted letting the world see work that was not refined to his exacting standard" (xiii; xiv). Only in Wallace's absence can Pietsch share the draft of a text which ultimately evokes his spiritual presence. Aware of the transgression implied in letting the reader glimpse behind the scenes of a Wallace production, Pietsch ends with an apologetic appeal to curiosity and readerly pleasure: "an unfinished novel is what we have, and how can we not look? David, alas, isn't here to stop us from reading, or to forgive us for wanting to" (xiv). Pietsch invokes a larger-than-life version of the writer to whom he, in lieu of Wallace's entire readership, can appeal for his curiosity to be forgiven. For although Wallace "isn't here," Pietsch feels his commanding presence throughout the text.

This revering rhetoric obscures the considerable financial incentive of Pietsch's employer to publish one more major novel by a bestselling and "precanonized" author (Hungerford, *Making*

152). Had Pietsch's moral deliberations led him to decide against editing the text, the publisher would surely have gotten someone else to edit the text for publication. The editor's vicarious transgression is rewarded with an intimate connection with the beloved author: The readers get a privileged look at Wallace's creative process and can (attempt to) curate an individual reading sequence of the modular text. Fittingly, the publisher had initially planned to publish *The Pale King* as a modular e-book for individual arrangement ("Everything"). But its printed edition chimes with notions of "curatorial labor" by the reader (Jordan) or "ergodic literature:" a fragmented, nonlinear narrative gaining coherence only through the reader's work (Aarseth 1–5). Of course, the novel's thematic focus on work mirrors this flexibility that both trusts and burdens the reader with a degree of self-determination.

Set in a Midwestern Regional Examination Center of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) in the spring of 1985, *The Pale King* deliberates the momentous post-Fordist transformation gripping the United States at the time, as well as its individual and institutional consequences. The narrative emphasizes two socioeconomic implications of its setting. On the one side, an ominous "Spackman Initiative" channels the spirit of the bureaucracy-loathing Reagan administration through its propagation of "an increasing anti- or post-bureaucratic mentality" (81 n19); the reader learns that "the question was whether and to what extent the IRS should be operated like a forprofit business" (85). On the other side, advanced computation threatens the job security of the novel's IRS employees. Ranging from legalities "so complicated as to almost defy description" (207) to confessional narratives, the fragmentary novel conveys both abstract tedium and human contingency in an institutional setting. It is no surprise then that the novel is often read as a commentary on the economic and ideological upheavals throughout the 1980s. Established perspectives on *The Pale King* interpret its interest in bureaucracy as an artistic statement on neoliberal governance (Godden and Szalay), as recovering a sense of humanism amidst the bureaucratic sublime (Boswell, "Author Here"; Severs), or even as outlining "what a Western communist or left front novel in the post-Cold War, post-9/11 period might look like" (Shapiro 1249). Though the criticism is wide-ranging, many scholars understand *The Pale King's* focus on the links between bureaucratic structures, civic virtue, and the reward of labor as resistance to contemporary capitalism's mandate of total flexibility.

While the following argument has an economic focus as well, the emphasis lies on a different and frequently misrepresented exchange system in Wallace's writing. In addition to its exploration of the economic transformation of American society, the novel shows an acute awareness of the growing instrumentalization of emotions in both private and professional contexts. In fact, *The Pale King* performatively deliberates the interpersonal adjustments mandated by this process through its careful mediation of the (implied) relationship between reader and author. By contextualizing Wallace's reputation as spearheading New Sincerity fiction with economic criticism through an analysis of *The Pale King*'s underlying emotional economy, this chapter brings two disconnected strains of Wallace Studies into dialogue. As will be demonstrated, Wallace's authorial persona acknowledges his readers' anxieties created by an increasingly contingent labor market and, in exchange for the intimacy of "quality time," mandates them to establish meaning in his incoherent novel. This narrative form of "emotional labor" (Hochschild, *Managed*), suggests that Wallace's complaints about industrial society's alienating tendencies conceal the fact that his texts excel at navigating the communicative challenges involved.

The novel's multitude of voices enables a distinction between the prominent parts that reach out toward the reader, i.e. through the confessional mode (section 3.2), and others that prevent such efforts (section 3.3). Addressing how these two poles of *The Pale King*'s emotional register set themselves apart in form and style helps to elucidate how the novel simultaneously echoes, questions and, as a medium, performs certain dynamics of what Illouz calls emotional capitalism. But to lay the groundwork for the eventual focus on the labors of reading (section 3.4), this chapter first historicizes Wallace's well-known concern with irony and sincerity in the post-Fordist context (section 3.1).

3.1. The Emotional Labor of Irony and Sincerity

In his seminal essay on Wallace and "the New Sincerity in American Fiction," Adam Kelly surveys the history of sincerity with the help of Trilling's *Sincerity and Authenticity* of 1972. After century-long importance within humanist discourse, Trilling states, the cultural significance of sincerity was questioned during modernism and gradually superseded by authenticity, a quality that focuses on being truthful to yourself but does not much care about others. Kelly finds that after Trilling's study both attitudes declined further amidst postmodernism's rise to cultural prominence (131–33). The poststructuralist skepticism toward the very categories that are essential for the

conception of inter-human relationships—subject, author and language—all but prevented such discourse. But New Sincerity's renewed interest in this time-honored category does not amount to an intellectual regression. Wallace's "return to sincerity" is instead "informed by a study of postmodernist fiction, in order to properly take into account the effects wrought by contemporary media, particularly TV and advertising" (134). For Kelly, Wallace's emphasis on sincerity is an attempt to overcome a stasis in postmodern fiction, whose initially subversive means became so widespread in late 20th century to have become blunt. In his frequently cited "Sincerity Manifesto" (Eve, "Sincerity") "E Unibus Pluram," Wallace blamed television's ubiquity for what he saw as aesthetic inertia and ethical indifference. TV's ability to appropriate "the very same cynical postmodern aesthetic that was once the best alternative to the appeal of low, over-easy, mass-marketed narrative" corrupted this very aesthetic and, even worse, turned its subversive potential into sarcastic conformity (173). As a result, "irony, poker-faced silence, and fear of ridicule" are common sentiments in contemporary US culture and prevent meaningful relationships (171). Wallace concludes his essay with a call for the "next real literary 'rebels'" who he envisions to be "some weird bunch of 'antirebels,'" coping with unfashionable and seemingly outdated problems of the human condition.

Wallace, for whom "writing fiction was a struggle for supremacy," evidently called for writers like himself (Boswell, *Wallace* 2). Their heroism would be vested in their willingness to "endorse single-entendre values," to be potentially perceived as "[t]oo sincere" and, in general, to "[r]isk disapproval" ("E" 192–93). According to this contrarian logic, boldness now lay in the unexpected *lack* of rebellion. Kelly sees Wallace's plea for sincerity to be based on a reconfigured "writer-reader relationship" that preserves "a love of truth, a truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity" ("David" 146). In this view,

> [t]he author and reader really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied,* not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions or immortalized placeholders. The text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time ("New" 206, original emphasis).

As will be highlighted (in section 3.4), the dependence "on a particular reader at a particular place and time" not only enables intimacy effects, it also depends on the reader's labor.

New Sincerity's artistic objective of outreach entails a dilemma: How does one convey sincerity in a culture that, as lamented by Wallace himself, is dominated by its opposites (e.g.

Wallace in McCaffery, cf. "E")? New Sincerity writers are aware of the risks inherent in their artistic enterprise and in fact frequently draw explicit attention to them in their texts. In other words, they are not only conscious of the various economic and cultural structures that palpably impact the way anyone expresses themselves; they also realize that these influences constantly put the very premise of sincerity at risk. In Kelly's words, "[t]rue sincerity […] is in fact made possible by the impossibility of its certain identification" by either writer or reader ("David" 140; cf. "New" 205). The (artistic) success then depends on the courage to try, *nevertheless*. Wallace acknowledges that "[w]e all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible[.]" But he emphasizes fiction's "nourishing" and "redemptive" potential, enabling the reader to "become less alone inside" (in McCaffery 127) and move toward intimacy, which is frequently "imagined precisely as the absence of loneliness" (Shumway 141).

Sincerity's success thus requires a wholehearted conviction and a convincing rendering of the intended empathetic gesture, a performance that persuades the recipient. As briefly discussed in section 2.2, van Alphen and Bal point to the performativity inherent in sincerity's conventional definition as "the performance of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it" (3). This understanding bears close resemblance to how Hochschild defines "emotional labor," namely as a process that requires one "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (7). Although Hochschild conceived the term for the instrumental mobilization of emotions at the work place, the notion is useful for intersubjective encounters in general (J. Beck). Once van Alphen and Bal's as well as Hochschild's insights into post-industrialism's affective complexities come into dialogue, sincerity emerges as a form of emotional labor.

This perspective in turn helps to historicize Wallace's grappling with the antagonism of irony and sincerity: His agenda appears appropriate when contesting the emotive detachment often associated with postmodern aesthetics. It challenges irony, cynicism and nihilism in an effort against the belittlement and denial of emotions. On a larger scale, it is a struggle against what Stearns describes in *American Cool,* namely the restrictive control of both private and public expressions of emotions in the course of the 20th century. Ironic detachment relies on cooled-down, controlled affect (Haselstein et al. 1–6). In contrast, sincerity necessitates a careful display of the right clues so that the outside world interprets them according to one's intent. If the reader, the

addressee of this performative rhetoric, believes there to be "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling 2), sincerity effects intimacy, a sense of authorial presence suggestive of mutual understanding and affection. In striking contrast to its stated aim, however, New Sincerity's performative element dialectically ties it firmly to further rationalization. The careful observation and reflexivization of cooled-down affects might enable their 'thawing,' but that only instrumentalizes them further, albeit toward different ends. Only a conscious and deliberate, that is to say strategic, rhetoric of emotions produces intimacy effects. There is evidently no escape from this reflexive trap and New Sincerity writing cannot be fairly criticized for a failure to express 'uncorrupted' or 'pure' emotions. But neither should New Sincerity's proclaimed courage to try nevertheless lead to an uncritical acceptance of its self-characterization.

Today, intimacy regularly appears in tandem with—or disguised as—"quality time." This genuinely post-industrial notion is defined as "time spent in a worthwhile or dedicated manner," for example, time spent with one's child or partner who "receives one's undivided attention" (OED). The term originates from 1970s' educational discourses and illustrates how managerial paradigms such as quality control trickle into the domestic sphere during the postwar period. As the term implies, time spent with loved ones may be insufficient if it does not meet certain quality standards. McGurl discusses how the dichotomy of "real" and "quality" time bears on contemporary culture. Real time signifies the apparent coincidence of an event and its registration, processing and representation through information technology. In contrast to real time's implied velocity, quality time implies the "intimacy, analogue, face-to-face, intersubjective attention" that the postwar housewife ought to provide for her children ("Real/Quality" 213). The respective etymological origins in Cold War era engineering, media and market exchanges and, conversely, the ideals of child rearing make the gendered distinction clear (209).

As the two terms—along with their societal premises—changed, their opposition evolved into a dialectic dependency. With reference to Hochschild, McGurl describes how women often found themselves in "emotionally rewarding" yet demanding work environments, once the family model of the male breadwinner was contested (216). Quality time, though still referring to intimacy with your loved ones, came to connote time management: the competing demands of time at work and at home (if distinguishable) transforms quality time into a scarce resource. Concurrently, the initially technological concept of "real time" entered management thought in the form of "just-in-

time" production and flexible assembly modes. The pressure on individuals to negotiate their desire for "quality time" in ever-accelerating "real time" reveals the crux of the matter:

> The problem with quality time […] is that it happens in real time—which is to say first of all, that it happens in a wider social surround geared to an ideal of ceaseless economic production and consumption hostile to the pleasant longueurs of human intimacy, let alone serious reading, or even sleep (218).

McGurl's observation mirrors Adorno's analysis of "free time" being structured by and "shackled to its contrary," "unfree time, time occupied by labor and, one should add, time that is determined heteronomously" (167). Literature, McGurl argues, "is nothing if not the virtualization of quality time" because "the novel finds its thematic substance in the myriad forms of human intimacy and intrigue" (218). Quality time evolved further still, "arriving finally at the subsidiary form known variously as 'alone time' or 'me time,' which is quality time with oneself—or with a book" (*Everything* 58). Real time not only conditions quality time as its prerequisite, its prevalence also triggers the increasing demand for respite. That the "intimacy, analogue, face-to-face, intersubjective attention" of quality time is increasingly individualized sheds light on the social context in which New Sincerity writing attempts to reach out to its readers: Fiction offers one way to evade the hectic of real time and indulge in a moment of rest and comfort, and while not every kind of fiction entails quality time, New Sincerity's explicit offer of a relatable authorial presence open to "a kind of intimate conversation between two consciences" meets this demand head-on (Wallace in Lipsky 289). This point was central for Wallace, for whom literature could provide

> a kind of Ah-ha! Somebody at least for a moment feels about something or sees something the way that I do. It doesn't happen all the time. It's these brief flashes and flames, but I get that sometimes. I feel unalone—intellectually, emotionally, spiritually. I feel human and unalone and that I'm in a deep, significant conversation with another consciousness in fiction and poetry in a way that I don't with other art (in L. Miller, "Salon" 62).

Much as literature could provide Wallace with the comfort he needed, his writing meets the post-industrial demand for intimacy.

The Pale King illustrates this relationship well. The novel contains numerous passages that evoke intimacy effects through intricate descriptions of situations recognizable to many of its readers: the emotionally charged tensions and contradictions that the knowledge workers of the American middle class endure every day in real time. As is common in Wallace's oeuvre, instrumentalized interiorities, self-conscious feedback loops and a sense of self-alienation plague

many of the novel's characters, virtually all of whom are IRS white-collar bureaucrats. Unsurprisingly, most of them are inappropriate role models for the management of such tensions; the novel relates one interpersonal failure after the other. It is precisely through these failures that the reader gets to participate in—and work through—the novel's insights about the value of boredom and endurance. Wallace premises this offer of quality time—of "inescapably personal" "connections between reader, writer, and text" (Fitzpatrick 184)—on the readers' intellectual work, testing their stamina and concentration through overwhelming amounts of (often irrelevant) information, a general incoherence and emotionally challenging narratives. Only once the readers have overcome the novel's difficulties can they absorb the author's wisdom, only then can they feel "his presence."

The requisite for this intimacy is the abandonment of detached reading. But as indicated, the question of what should replace the cool and detached attitude that Wallace criticizes is subtle and, much like other texts by Wallace, *The Pale King*, is too intricate and ambivalent to offer straightforward solutions in the manner of self-help. The text circumscribes the communicative challenges at its core through characters that either fail at or are scarred by intimacy (sections 3.2 and 3.3). But by working through the characters' awkwardness and flawed intimacies, the readers can eventually enter "the intimate conversation" that Wallace promises.

3.2. Communicative Incompetence (Chris Fogle and "David Wallace")

Chris Fogle and "David Wallace," two of *The Pale King*'s more prominent characters, serve as illustrations for how the novel negotiates communicative struggles. In the novel's largest chapter, 101 pages resembling a self-contained novella, the IRS employee Fogle reflects upon his development from "wastoid" to accountant in an interview meant to be used for an IRS recruitment film (156). Fogle tells his story as an awakening to civic duty and emotional responsivity, his personal overcoming of the *American Cool*. As an adolescent, he "was the worst kind of nihilist" who took a whole range of recreational drugs and whose "essential response to everything was 'Whatever'" (156). In college, "everything was fuzzy and abstract and open to interpretation and then those interpretations were open to still more interpretations […] the whole point of the classes themselves was that nothing meant anything, that everything was abstract and endlessly interpretable" (157). After several half-hearted attempts to graduate, Fogle has an epiphany when accidently sitting in on an accounting class where he learns that "the heroic frontier now lies in the

ordering and deployment of […] facts. Classification, organization, presentation" (234). He subsequently pursues a career with the IRS and, with hindsight, summarizes: "The Truth is that most of what I really know about myself I learned in the Service" (167).

Fogle's story about being "called to account" explicitly resembles the therapeutic narrative that Illouz identifies as a central form of (self-)expression in emotional capitalism (235): He overcomes his stasis, is both passive (patient, "wastoid") and active (student, citizen) at once and delivers a confessional testimony. He is "seriously embarrassed" about his past, parts of which he felt "hypocritical" about at the time already (165, 168). Moreover, he insists on his newly won agency in the present and future and, through the performative recounting of his past, exonerates himself from his wasted youth (Illouz, *Saving* 183–86). At his tedious job as a tax return examiner, Fogle now enters those cognitive spheres of almost total concentration and self-awareness for which he had relied on drugs in the past (220). The heightened state of attention necessitated by his profession might be challenging, but it is worth it, as he learns from his inadvertent accounting teacher. In the latter's words, to defeat such "enemies" as "[r]outine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy [sic], inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui" (233) and to disregard what others might think of you and your job amounts to "heroism" (231):

> True heroism is you, alone, in a designated workspace. True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care—with no one there to see or cheer. This is the world. Just you and the job, at your desk (232).

Fogle's morality tale is undermined in various ways. Not only is his idiosyncratic story unsuitable as an inspiration to others because a chance encounter causes his personal transformation; in addition, the accounting teacher who embodies everything desirable for Fogle is himself a dubious character. Much like Fogle's evaluation of his past self as a cliché of a "nihilist," the teacher's unconditional beliefs in authority, undeniable truths, and his complete indifference toward his appearance makes him a mere cliché of the other extreme, bending toward an authoritarian personality (Dorson, "How" 76).

The satirical element continues in Fogle's regret about having changed his life only after his father died, for he would have appreciated his son's "PP-47 performance evaluations, and [would have enjoyed] to talk about cost systems and forensic accounting with [Fogle] from a vastly more adult perspective" (190–91). In contrast to an emotionally detached past, the imagined father-

son relationship is a bureaucratic persiflage and a debatable vision of intimacy indeed. Fogle himself summarizes the episode's moral about the impossibility of a clear-cut moral himself when he muses about how "enormous, sudden, dramatic, unexpected, life-changing experiences are not translatable or explainable to anyone else, and this is because they really *are* unique and particular" (216, original emphasis). This resistance against the universalization of his personal success story signifies the only deviation from the therapeutic narrative's catalogue as described by Illouz. His insistence on individual experiences curtails the commodifying logic of his conversion story.

Yet the fundamental reason for why Fogle's "massive information dump" (Huehls 163) fails to inspire anyone lies in his many self-conscious interjections. Throughout, Fogle remains "not sure I even know what to say" and, among countless digressions, including one about the freak accident that killed his father and several repetitive loops, he continually wonders whether his account so far "is enough" or what other employees might have said (156, 164). Although he has found a meaningful way of life for himself, Fogle struggles to convey his awakening to a career at the IRS to others. As a result of his uncertainty, he adds cautionary notes to many episodes. He judges "elements of [his] memory" to be "certainly credible" but awkwardly states elsewhere that "[m]ost of these almost feel like some other person's memories" (240, 164). Not having internalized the teacher's dictum that "[t]rue heroism is *a priori* incompatible with audience or applause" (232, original emphasis), Fogle's anxiety impairs his persuasiveness. Other characters attest to the counterproductive effects of his nervousness. One promises he will not "waste time noodling about every last gap and imprecision in [his] own memory" like "'Irrelevant' Chris Fogle" (259 n3). Anyone talking to Fogle, the reader learns elsewhere, would at some point rotate their "hand in the air in the please-get-on-with-it way" (273 n17). Fogle does not suffer from the communicative paralysis that afflicts other characters of *The Pale King*,[16] but because his insecurity leads to unfiltered and wildly digressive thoughts, the result is no better.

The following examines a communicative problem of a different kind: "David Wallace" can express himself, but due to forces beyond his reach, he finds himself hard-pressed to explain

[16] The novel's second chapter introduces Claude Sylvanshine, a low-level employee working in the IRS' personnel department on a trip to Peoria. The first member of a team moving to the Midwest, he suffers from anxiety attacks that he tries to curb through several self-help techniques. But the text makes clear that therapeutic wisdoms ranging from constant self-reflection to bodily relaxation exercises are of no help at all. The ironic suggestion is that Sylvanshine would do much better was he unaware of the subtle complexities and supposed dangers of the human psyche. Having absorbed (pop) psychology's wisdoms, his emotionality presents itself as the sum of useless clichés.

himself. His many "quick aside[s]" eventually produce a very similar effect on the reader to that of his "logorrheic colleague" and "maundering grandstander" Fogle (261; 259 n3). "Author's Foreword," the novel's ninth chapter, introduces someone claiming to be "the real author, the living human holding the pencil, not some abstract persona" (68). A character by the name of "David Wallace" states repeatedly that the "book is really true" (69), "basically a nonfiction memoir, with additional elements of reconstructive journalism, organizational psychology, elementary civics and tax theory" (75). Moreover, he maintains that "[t]he only bona fide 'fiction' here is the copyright page's disclaimer" (70). Though an authorial persona appears in *The Pale King*," "Wallace" hastily adds that this is "mainly a pro forma statutory construct, an entity that exists just for legal and commercial purposes, rather like a corporation" (68).

Some scholars point out with reference to inconsistencies to his age, appearance, character and his (fabricated) social security number that "Wallace" is "not meant to be mistaken for the author" (Konstantinou, "Wallace's" 59; cf. Heller 156). But these discrepancies are only apparent to readers actively investigating an author who even fictionalized his nonfiction (Harris). Anyone else might harbor doubts about such claims to facticity in an unfinished novel, yet this does not diminish the narrative's intimate appeal. In the three supposedly autobiographical chapters, "Wallace" addresses the reader directly and creates narrative intimacy through a rhetoric distinct from more abstract chapters. "Wallace" claims authenticity through the allusion to time-honored artistic clichés. Not only is he, the solitary artist, "holding the pencil" rather than typing on some mundane keyboard, he also makes transparent to the reader his "artful compression" (278 n25) of sources such as "an unusually long, intense, unpunctuated notebook entry" (279) and "some specially selected relevant portions of" his recollections (263).

"Wallace's" story of how he became an interim worker in the IRS during a suspension from college best exemplifies this tone. Similarly to Fogle, his account relies on therapeutic and confessional registers: "Wallace" confesses his past faults (ghostwriting for other students) and then, much like his colleague Fogle, works through them by way of (re)telling. His narrative thus draws its intimate appeal by openly admitting its heavy mediation, playfully inversing the rule that intimacy thrives on presence. In numerous lengthy footnotes, the character elaborates or comments on his own narrative. Repeatedly, these footnotes function as correctives through which "Wallace" bemoans his loss of autonomy in the "extremely involved and confusing" environment of the IRS

(258). In one characteristic footnote, he apologizes for a vague sentence, stating that it "is the product of much haggling and compromise with the publisher's legal team" (75 fn10). In a metafictional play on the confessional mode premised on the impossibility of unmediated literature as well as a nod to the recent success of autofiction (see section 5.2), "Wallace" seeks to establish his credibility by addressing the misleading qualities of memory and some of his editorial choices.

"Wallace's" self-presentation as an object of larger powers is underscored by *The Pale King*'s form. Due to "yet another spasm of last-minute caution on the part of the publisher," he reports that this very foreword does not stand at the beginning of the book, as would be expected, but has "been moved seventy-nine pages into the text." However, when the reader follows "Wallace's" prompt to "see below," the page is not "seventy-nine" (69 fn2). The listed page number varies with each of *The Pale King*'s editions, but never matches "Wallace's" declaration, a contrast in formal support of his claimed powerlessness: Although the character recounts what he purports to be *his* life story, he is not in control, even unaware, of his memoir's actual appearance. In the novel's original hardcover edition, Pietsch's note and the surrounding interleaves accurately compensate the inconsistency. Wallace had planned for this arrangement by inserting a placeholder for the page in the footnote quoted above, but promotional blurbs again distort the count in subsequent editions (Haddad 47–48). After the author's death, economic deliberations thus confirm the very constraints on the artistic process that "Wallace" bemoans. Although the decision to include blurbs was surely not Pietsch's alone, his above exclamation that "David, alas, isn't here to stop us," takes on a much more mundane connotation: After the passing of an author who wrestled with the consequences of an all-encompassing media environment and who would have vetoed excessive promotion (Haddad 47 fn44), there is no need for further restraint. Faced with similar power dynamics, "Wallace" sees himself forced to constantly contextualize, justify, or apologize for something. The result is a restless narrative in which "Wallace" explains every feasible aspect of 'his memoir' about a time in which he, appropriately enough, learned about the importance of "dullness, information, and irrelevant complexity" (87). This combination of overwhelming information and redundance, signal how *The Pale King* formally mirrors its theme of large-scale bureaucracy's sublimity.

Many of *The Pale King*'s characters view their occupation as something profound and value their workplace's locality and processes as fundamentally important. While the anxiety of the

human resources manager Claude Sylvanshine increases with every mile he draws nearer to his workplace, Fogle values the IRS as a source of stability and perceives its many rules as a soothing contrast to his careless youth. "Wallace" similarly insists that he learned much about life during his stint at the IRS. *The Pale King* almost exclusively portrays employees in what C. Wright Mills describes as the awkward middle position of white-collar workers (88–91). Whereas Fogle willingly submits himself to authority without questions, "Wallace" is uncomfortably stuck in the middle of contradictory forces. The episode of his misidentification by the IRS administration with yet another David Wallace pointedly demonstrates his powerlessness as a proverbial cog in the machine, and so does the embellished account of his marginalized position as a supposed memoir writer haunted by legal concerns. Both Fogle's and "Wallace's" life stories fit the "misery memoir," a therapeutic narrative recounting rather trivial 'traumas' (Illouz, *Saving* 182–83). Yet undercut by constant interruptions, explanations and digressions, their accounts lose their conventional appeal.

In their restless but failing efforts to inspire, both Fogle's and "Wallace's" accounts emulate what Sianne Ngai identifies as "zany" aesthetics. She examines how aesthetic experiences change under the influence of late capitalism's intensified commodification, performance and information (*Our* 1). Zaniness here "speaks to a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and working" that is representative of the post-Fordist era and is characterized by a hyperactive mode of "incessant activity[,]" frantic adaptation and emotional intensity in a labor-intensive performance (188, 185). Unlike related modes, such as the goofy or silly, however, zaniness implies "a stressed-out, even desperate quality" (185) preventing comic relief and creating ambiguity:

> The unfunnyness of total or absolute adaptability, while arguably brought to a head by the flexible network capitalism of our current moment, goes a long way toward explaining the discomforting aspect of all of modernity's zanies. Far from being 'divinely untroubled,' zaniness projects the 'personality pattern' of the subject wanting too much and trying too hard: the unhappily striving wannabe, poser, arriviste. The utter antithesis of ironic cool, the perspiring, overheated zany is a social loser (189).

This passage characterizes *The Pale King*'s many awkward characters well. Both Fogle and "Wallace" are "subject[s] wanting too much and trying too hard." Their hyperactivity and lack of focus lead them to achieve very little. In the competent handling and communication of emotions, they undoubtedly fail. Another of *The Pale King*'s autobiographically inspired characters is a near literal representation of Ngai's "perspiring, overheated zany:" David Cusk suffers from excessive

sweating triggered by self-conscious feedback loops circling the very fear of sweating (cf. Max, *Every* 64). Predictably, this literal "antithesis of ironic cool" causes a variety of social problems: "just the thought of the prospect of being looked at was enough to send a small aftershock of heat through Cusk's body, and he could feel selected pinpricks of sweat breaking out along his hairline and just under his lower eyelid, which were the sites where sweat usually first appeared" (325). For Cusk, intimacy presents a source of terror.

Ngai's concept of zaniness expands the discussion in several ways. Firstly, the association of zaniness with anxiety fits Wallace's "weird bunch of 'antirebels.'" Zaniness counteracts what Wallace perceived as postmodernism's aloofness and represents a form of pitiable helplessness incompatible with ironic or cool detachment. With reference to Boltanski and Chiapello, Ngai secondly highlights that the current capitalist constellation values activity as an end in itself. Fogle and "Wallace's" labor-intensive performances mimic post-Fordism's demands in both form and content: they endure monotony and relative powerlessness while restlessly performing often inconsequential activities. In the narrative's emulation of real time, a mode that James Wood calls "hysterical realism," they undergo endless communicative efforts to explain the causes for this very constellation: "a perpetual-motion machine that appears to have been embarrassed into velocity" (Wood).

While *The Pale King* prominently evokes zaniness, the following section shows how its fragmentation and aesthetic plurality allows both for deviations from and opposition to this style. Though they do not dominate the novel, these parts nevertheless trouble the predominant aesthetic and help to illuminate against which contrasting backdrop Wallace's intimacy effects unfold.

3.3. Auto-Didacticism amidst Hostility (Toni Ware)

The Pale King recounts in great detail how its characters were "called to account" at the IRS (235). Although the two protagonists discussed in 3.2 describe fairly trivial transitions into the world of wage labor and communicate poorly, the reader gets to know them intimately exactly *because* of their awkwardness. Their colleague Toni Ware, in contrast, is the novel's only character with an undoubtedly traumatic youth. Because Ware is one of *The Pale King*'s few female characters, she also warrants a discussion about the role of gender in Wallace's oeuvre.

Ware is alone not only in the sense of a young teenager left to her own devices in a destitute environment. Moreover, she is alone as one of only two women receiving more than passing

attention in a novel populated by dozens of characters and, in Ware's case, this interest is still limited to about twenty pages. Although the women's experiences are decidedly different, both suffer at the hands of their male counterparts.[17] As a child, Ware is raped at least twice, beaten by her mother's fleeting partners, one of whom "had once punched her stomach so hard she saw colors and smelled up close the carpets' grit base" (59), and only narrowly escapes death at the hands of the man who murders her mother. Ware's severe case is no outlier in Wallace's works. As epitomized by the collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, his writing repeatedly interrogates masculine violence. In Ware's passages, *The Pale King* initially mirrors the dynamic that prevails in these stories: active males abuse passive female bodies. But given Wallace's explicit awareness of this problem, this imbalance alone does not prove a misogynist bend. Holland argues that Wallace, although critical of the masculinist bias in literary and general culture, remains (somewhat comfortably) trapped within this cultural framework. She coins the result a "feminist parody of feminism" that, although it intends to expose the "physical and linguistic oppression of women" by (writing) men, can only do so in the form of parody, "by exposing the limits—inherent in the roles of self and author—of all past, present, and future attempts to do so, including his own" ('Hirsute' 74). Wallace channels his apprehension about masculinity's "seemingly inherent tendency to coopt, disempower, or manipulate the female other in the service of its own needs" as well as language's imperfect ability "to ameliorate those anxieties—and his anxiety about the ways in which he might be complicit in them" (68). For Holland, this degree of complicity remains unresolved and therefore is a productive angle of inquiry into Wallace's oeuvre.

Clare Hayes-Brady conversely sees the lack of well-developed female characters in Wallace's writing as "not based in antipathy but in alterity." Assuming an "inviolable strangeness of the female to the male consciousness," Wallace deliberately creates opaque female characters which stand in "an oppositional balance with the forceful, dynamic males." As a result, women in Wallace's fiction are the mute gravitational center around which male characters orbit ("Language" 131). In contrast to Holland and Hayes-Brady, Hungerford's critique of Wallace is based on what she sees as his personal hypocrisy. Conjecturing "a profound connection between Wallace's [frequently abusive] treatment of women and his literary project," she questions whether the author

[17] The other female character receiving sizeable narrative attention, is the "wrist-bitingly attractive" Meredith Rand. As a result of her appearance, every interaction she has with her heterosexual male colleagues becomes unbearable due to their efforts to "perform for her" in one way or another (449).

reflects on his own behavior as much as his texts suggest (147). This, as well as the overabundance of other literary texts worthy of attention, prompt Hungerford to call for a "critical not-reading" of Wallace (148–63). This is paradoxical (and silly) since the publicly announced exclusion of writers from syllabi remains fraught: either the reasons for exclusion should be discussed, "in which case you might as well include them," or they should be left out without any comment (Hayes-Brady in Paulson; cf. Boswell, *Wallace* 125–48). The following will not resolve the question of whether *The Pale King* succeeds in exposing patriarchy's brutality by laying bare masculine violence in gruesome detail, fails by merely reproducing it or, alternatively, resists clear interpretations. At any rate, this chapter profits from Holland's and Hayes-Brady's nuanced examinations rather than a "critical not-reading."

Two out of the three chapters dedicated entirely to Ware relate the horrors that shape her childhood, dominated by poverty and violence in-between trailer parks and homelessness. But because the narrative does not, like with "Wallace" or Fogle, dwell on her past, Ware might be the novel's most enigmatic character. Shunning a sentimental tone, the text's eighth chapter relates her exploitation and parental neglect in a detached free indirect discourse resembling naturalism's distanced gloom:

> The park's boys wore wide rumpled hats and cravats of thong and some displayed turquoise about their person, and of these one helped her empty the trailer's sanitary tank and then pressed her to fellate him in recompense, whereupon she promised that anything emerging from his trousers would not return there. No boy near her size had successfully pressed her since Houston and the two who put something in her pop that made them turn sideways in the air and she could not then fight and lay watching the sky while they did their distant business (57).

Ware's childhood takes place in a hostile environment. In this context, "distant business" is neither a euphemism for rape, nor does the fact that Ware was drugged solely account for the degree of separation implied in "distant." Focalized through the character, the expression instead anticipates a form of self-defense through disembodiment that becomes Ware's survival skill. Before turning to this defense mechanism in more detail, however, the idiosyncratic style of the respective chapters ought to be discussed.

The obvious stylistic tension between the quoted passage and the rest of *The Pale King* has led several critics to suggest intertextual references. Stephen J. Burn links Ware's sections primarily to the "shock-based aesthetic" of Bret Easton Ellis. In turn, John Sullivan and Lucas Thompson interpret them as an overly explicit and hence somewhat ambivalent reference to

Cormac McCarthy. Thompson enumerates how the relevant sections employ McCarthy's "full range of […] technical repertoire, using both poly- and asyndeton, parataxis, archaisms, Biblicisms, metaphysical microcosms, and a host of other devices in an attempt to mimic the older writer's prose" ("Books" 17–18). The overlong opening sentence of the novel's eighth chapter displays all of these. With 288 words, oddly ornate descriptions, and a distinct lack of punctuation, it is unfeasible to quote in its entirety. But Thompson's point is illustrated by the fact that the disaffected narrative voice passes, in its approaching motion toward Ware's trailer park, "the sound of dry things snapping and stridulation of bugs," "two bottles and bright plastic packet impaled on the mulberry twig," an alleged scene of a murder, and "the needles and stems of a long winter" that crunch "noisomely […] beneath a plurality of shoes" (55–56). Thompson argues compellingly that Wallace follows "a strategy of amplification" with regards to "McCarthy's most florid renderings" (18).

Ware learns to defend herself against the overwhelming perils around her. The text enumerates her dexterity in discreetly killing those who threaten her. The "would-be assailant" of the section quoted above is no longer seen after Ware deposits "[a]sbestos cloth cut carefully into strips" into a pay dryer holding his clothes (61).[18] Likewise, the man who beat her in the stomach goes missing after "she learned to cut a brake line so the failure would be delayed until such time as the depth of the cut determined" (59). The same goes for a rapist who "returned no more" after Ware "kneaded powered glass into the meat" of a hamburger deliberately left out for him (60). Ware's deadly craft is described matter-of-factly; the assertion that a competent manipulation of a car's fuel or brake line "took a certain feel" reads like a sarcastic remark on her apparent cold-bloodedness (61). However, Ware is not devoid of emotionality and eagerly studies the unwritten rules of interhuman relations.

[18] The "asbestos cloth" is only one of the chapter's references to environmental neglect. Beyond the omnipresent litter in the trailer park, the horizon is framed by "fires in the gypsum hills to the north, the smoke of which hung and stank of salt […] At night from the trailer's park the hills possessed of a dirty orange glow and the sounds of living trees exploding in the fires' heat did carry, and the noise of planes plowing the undulant air above and dropping thick tongues of talc. Some nights it rained fine ash which upon contacting turned to soot and kept all souls indoors" (56). These forms of environmental neglect link to the novel's concern with the Regan administration's deregulation agenda. The chapter makes clear, moreover, that economic and ecological depravation go together. After 'big government' retreats, the poor are not only left to their own devices; they also are the first to be exposed to the environmental problems this deregulation entails. A similar retreat of the state is evident in the absence of authorities: The narrative is mute on whether either her mother's death or those of Toni's victims are investigated, but it appears unlikely.

Ware is an autodidact by necessity. Her mother, a would-be role model in the logic of the nuclear family, serves as a negative example: Her "relational skills were indifferent and did not include truthful or consistent speech" and her "conception of men was that she used them as a sorceress will dumb animals, as sign and object of her unnatural powers"—a delusion leading to "a succession of bad-news men" (58, 63, 441). In the spirit of (neo)naturalism, the narrative does not dwell on the mother's failures and instead highlights her own history of abuse. Ware's grandmother suffered from paranoid schizophrenia and exposed her daughter to the corresponding delusional behavior (59). As a result, Toni's relationship to her mother reverses: "The child as mother to the woman" (56). Faced with omnipresent threats and an unreliable mother, Toni learns to privilege deeds over statements, "to trust actions and to read sign in details of which the run of children are innocent" (59). The narrative reiterates this point, stating that "[t]he girl made it her business to read signs and know the facts of her own history past and present" (60). Given how violent Ware's "history past and present" is, "her business" to correctly interpret the information available to her is always urgent. In contrast to her middle-class colleagues at the IRS, a failure in this regard does not result in awkward self-consciousness, but personal danger.

When self-defense is futile, Ware shifts from preemptive action to absolute passivity and "plays dead." Having observed this behavior in her mother who suffers from "catatonic/cataleptic" paralysis, Ware comes to master "this state, which involved sitting or lying extremely still, slowing your pulse, breathing in such a way that your chest doesn't even rise, and holding your eyes open for long periods." With endless practice, she overcomes the immense pain when "the eyes start to burn as they dry out" and brings to perfection what biologists call apparent death (441). It is indicative of a naturalist logic that Ware relies on a defense mechanism common in wildlife. She has internalized a ruthless free-for-all logic reminiscent of nature's survival of the fittest. When resistance is pointless, she plays dead to prevent her own death, but does not hesitate to kill a perceived threat when given the opportunity. *The Pale King* relates two instances of Ware relying on her unique skill: first, when one of her mother's partners molests her (65), the second time when that same man, after having suffocated her mother to death in a wrecked car, looks for life signs in Ware. Her convincing performance of death saves her life: "no regular living human can sit there with their eyes open that long without blinking, so he knew" (444).

Ware is a minor character within *The Pale King* and has received only glancing scholarly attention, most of which focuses on her peculiar skill. Hayes-Brady interprets Ware's playing dead as a "voluntary displacement of subjectivity" that, in its effect, arrives at the other extreme: "Toni's capacity for literal self-denial is in fact the strongest affirmation of her self-sufficiency, her feigned death the mark of her absolute life" (*Unspeakable* 189–90). Ware's self-objectification is frequently linked to her first name Toni's anagram in "NOT I" (Burn 382; Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable* 135). The name "Ware" also conjures a commodification, especially to German speakers. Hayes-Brady's assessment of Ware's "extreme ambivalence toward the idea of proximity, emotional interaction, or communicative exchange" is surely correct (189), but somewhat blunt given that it applies to virtually all of the novel's characters and thus misses Ware's specific urgency. Her "ambivalence" might not even be all that pronounced in comparison to other characters. Despite of the "mistrustful and threatening demeanor" on display in the ten pages devoted to Ware as an adult, she seems to have grasped an instrumental use of communication that Fogle and "Wallace" never reach (189).

As indicated, Ware's emotional skills are self-taught. Her habit of sending "for catalogues and Free Offers […] with samples of products that people with homes would buy to enjoy at their leisure" merely demonstrates her distance to the middle-class (61). However, her commitment to literature helps her expand her consciousness beyond her bleak condition: "The girl read stories about horses, bios, science, psychiatry, and *Popular Mechanics* when obtainable. She read history in a determined way" (60). Although there remain ambiguous elements—"She read *My Struggle* and could not understand all the fuss"—the narrative highlights the importance of reading:

> She read Wells, Steinbeck, Keene, Laura Wilder (twice), and Lovecraft. She read halves of many torn and castoff things. She read a coverless *Red Badge* and knew by sheer feel that its author had never seen war nor knew that past some extremity one floated just above the fear and could blinklessly watch it while doing what had to be done or allowed to stay alive (60, original emphasis).

Ware's material deprivation does not allow for a curated reading list, but H. G. Wells, John Steinbeck, H. P. Lovecraft and James Keene (pseudonym of Ida and William Cook) nevertheless indicate a rather bleak literary outlook on the human condition. The text does not reveal Ware's judgement for each text, but her disdain for Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* indicates skepticism for any aestheticization of suffering. According to her "sheer feel," literary representation cannot do justice to life's horrors. Unlike Crane, who never went to war, Ware

literally knows how to "blinklessly watch it while doing what had to be done"—it is this conscious disassociation that renders the first rape as "distant business." The reference to another rape, "[h]er second experience of the kind her books made seem sweet through indifferent speech," similarly emphasizes Ware's contempt for the artistic appropriation of suffering (59).

Laura Wilder is the evident outlier of the listed writers. She is the only discernibly female author and, additionally, the only one focusing on the life of a woman. Ware's interest in the representation of women is substantiated when, elsewhere in the text, she reads "a biography of" financier and business woman Hetty Green as well as *Macbeth* (62). Yet the reason that Ware reads "Laura Wilder (twice)" might lie in the book's alterity: While the dread of Crane's *Red Badge* is familiar but unconvincing, the pastoral harmony and libertarianism of Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* appeal to Ware because they are unknown. The "bodiless doll" Ware treasures conversely symbolizes the incongruity of her yearning for intimate attachments and her deprived life. Ware "often wished she had a cat or some small pet to feed and reassure as she stroked [the doll's] head" (62–63). A short chapter later reveals this desire to be fulfilled when she threatens a neighbor: "If anything happens to these dogs […] I'll sacrifice my life and freedom to destroy you and everyone you love." After her modest social move upward, Ware's threatening register is out of place; the chapter appropriately ends on an anticlimactic note: The neighbor decides to "just let her alone" (153).

Narrative changes of perspective highlight such mismatches through a discrepancy of style and content. Unlike the chapter dedicated to her childhood, most passages in which Toni Ware receives glancing narrative attention are focalized through other characters and employ a tone closer to the novel's dominant style. Her narrow escape from death at the hands of her mother's murderer is a compelling example: An unidentified narrator, presumably a coworker at the IRS, presents the events as an entertaining episode. In contrast to the naturalist gloom of the eighth chapter, numerous insertions by the narrator punctuate the chronological continuation of Ware's life. The narrator casually summarizes the familial plight as "Toni's mum was a bit nuts, as was her own mom," gets bored after some more details—"Blah blah"—and later mocks Ware's mother "who, let's recall, was not a paragon of stability" (441–42). An equally flippant remark concludes the passage: "Sheesh. So do not mess with this girl; this girl is damaged goods" (445). Such is the perspective of Ware's coworkers, one of whom "had remarked that Toni Ware was creepy because,

even though she wasn't shy or evasive and would maintain eye contact, she seemed to be staring *at* your eyes rather than *into* them" (443, original emphasis). Similar to how Ware's clearly discernable voice is quarantined by framing narratives that tend to trivialize her history, Ware's recalcitrant essence remains concealed within *The Pale King*'s size. In addition to some single-line references, only about twenty-three of over five hundred pages are devoted to its most enigmatic character. While Ware's fate helps to put the banalities of "Wallace" or Fogle into perspective, the novel nevertheless repeats emotional capitalism's class bias in terms of narrative space. Unsurprisingly, the secondary literature on the novel reproduces this imbalance in a lack of journalistic and scholarly interest in the character. Although Sullivan opines that Ware's sections are "[t]he most remarkable pages" and "steal the novel, in an interesting way," his opinion remains solitary: No other review takes note of Ware.

In contrast to the focalizations closer to Ware, *The Pale King*'s dominant narrative perspective implies that her childhood leaves her scarred. Unable to engage in the conversational conventions prevalent in the Midwestern suburbs and the IRS, she remains an indecipherable outsider: "The only thing someone in a store or line might remark about her was a faint affective abstraction, a quality of detachment that was not the detachment of peace or a personal relation with Our Lord Jesus Christ" (516). Yet Ware's enigmatic appearance is at least in part deliberate; she likes "to come in under people's radar" (514). In the last chapter focalized through Ware, she undertakes various sabotages. She first places an order for copper tubes by phone under a stolen identity for an undisclosed purpose and, "merely to pass time," fabricates a violation at the hands of a gas station clerk (516). For both these endeavors, she relies on her manipulative skills. For the phone order, she employs one of her "twenty different voices; all but two were warm and pleasant" (512):

> The voice she used with the Butts Hardware clerk was younger than she, conspicuously jejune, causing merchants whose emotional tastes were more refined than simple exploitation to feel paternal—superior and tender at the same time. What she said when he confirmed her order was: 'Great. Very great. Yay,' with 'Yay' stated instead of shouted. It was a voice that caused the listener to imagine someone with long blond hair and bell-bottoms who cocked her head and gave even statements an interrogative lilt. She played on this knife-edge most of the time—giving a false impression that was nevertheless concrete and tightly controlled. It felt like art (513).

Ware regulates the voice's quality as well as the effect it has at the other end of the line; to her, the insincere performance of sincerity feels "like art." Similarly to her playing dead, she anticipates

the (gendered) expectations and matches these convincingly. The quoted passage shows Ware's emotional autodidacticism to be successful. Aware of the social conventions, she can manipulate her own appearance according to external expectations. As a social outsider, she soberly analyzes the emotional conventions of her new environment. Though they lie at opposite ends of her skillset, playing dead and "making nice" are related in this way: In comparison to her childhood's survival skill of total self-objectification, the minor manipulations of social encounters appear simple.

In turn, the scene's auditive focus implies that Ware's "creepy" stare impedes personal encounters that go beyond niceties. With regards to "obsessive attachments" such as her dogs (Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable* 189), she is unable to make nice and her scorn for superficialities remains. While paying at a gas station, she mocks the unknowing cashier's "complacent solipsism" and "smile long-practiced to seem so sincere" by "affecting the exact accent and cadence of [the cashier's] own speech" (516). Ware might appear cold-blooded, yet she brings to attention the thin line between a manipulative character and a people person. Through her deceit, Wallace draws attention to the precarity of his own pursuit of (literary) sincerity. Despite such ambiguity, *The Pale King* not only insists on the centrality of work for the development of Ware and others, it also asks its readers to 'learn' a lesson that is comparable to theirs.

3.4. Reading Labor

In a similar fashion to how some characters draw profound insights from their tedious work within the IRS, the reader's labor is central to *The Pale King*. More precisely, the novel formally erodes "the distinction between playing and working" (Ngai, *Our* 185) in that its readers have to invest intellectual labor in order to enjoy it: The numerous and often lengthy footnotes of the "Wallace" chapters illustrate this point. They do not only contain helpful information about *The Pale King*'s manifold narrative strands, but frequently develop self-contained paratextual narratives on bureaucratic tedium. Many footnotes appear in the middle of the often seemingly endless sentences, forcing the reader to part ways with one train of thought or miss out on another. By fragmenting the hermeneutic process and making the reader meander across its pages, the book foregrounds its haptic tactility through an effect of metamediality as theorized by Alexander Starre: A "literary work becomes a metamedium," Starre writes, "once it uses specific devices to reflexively engage with the specific material medium to which it is affixed or in which it is displayed" (8). Given the small size of the footnotes in most of *The Pale King*'s editions, the text

formally highlights the narrative's wisdom about the value of reading the small print. Furthermore, the chapter fragments vary considerably in length, narrativity and style. While this design creates an overwhelming reading experience, the lingering human elements within the bureaucratic sublime offer moments of respite. The banal small talk in-between shifts or the dreadful commute are all subject to narrative attention. Here, the reader's invested work is rewarded with a sense of recognition.

For to engage meaningfully with Wallace's fiction, mere consumption is not enough; his texts demand to be worked on. The question of how to grapple with his literature appropriately is pressing because Wallace's most-lauded texts are formally demanding works indulging in aesthetics of excess. In *The Cruft of Fiction*, David Letzler explicates this formal challenge. He borrows the term cruft from coding slang to refer to redundant or irrelevant information that readers must navigate in doorstop novels. Taking inspiration from neuro-scientific research, he argues that when faced with overwhelming narratives, readers must not pay attention to everything, but should identify what is important: "we need to develop […] not the ability to pay closer attention to everything, but a sophisticated *attentional modulation*" (13, original emphasis). Although *The Pale King* cannot compete with Wallace's magnum opus *Infinite Jest* in size and might not quite qualify as a "mega-novel," both texts share a formal incoherence that mirrors their narrative themes of pervasive fragmentation. *The Pale King* stretches across fifty tangentially connected chapters of about five hundred pages. Complex plots with countless characters (many mysterious, some nameless), confusing narratives with an overwhelming amount of information, much of it absurd and seemingly irrelevant and difficult, occasionally impossible to understand: Next to his well-known "rhetorical pyrotechnics" (Konstantinou, "Wallace's" 56), these are the much-admired characteristics of Wallace's prose. As Fogle reports about his introductory session to the IRS:

> the whole thing was so complicated, and consisted of so many branches, sub-branches, divisions, and coordinating offices and sub-offices, as well as parallel or bilateral sub-offices and technology support divisions, that it appeared impossible to comprehend even the general sense of well enough to take a real interest in (247–48).

As this passage both describes and performs, *The Pale King*'s focus on taxation fits Wallace's resistance against easy consumption and illustrates "the function of cruft […]: it takes up a great deal of space to no apparent purpose, but in doing so, it masks similar-looking text that does have purpose, challenging readers to refine the way they modulate their attention in processing it"

(Letzler 19). Recalling Wallace's thoughts on the difficulty of creating and consuming meaningful art in an age of allegedly hegemonic irony and narcissism, these obstacles serve as means to de-familiarize his readers in order to then enable a substantive intellectual exchange: Readers in search of quality time will have to adhere to "[t]he moral obligation to pay attention" (Andersen 17) and work through an "incredibly complicated and idiosyncratic" text that, much like the near-sublime structure of the IRS within the novel, "require[s] far more time and energy to ferret out and truly understand than any sane person would want to expend" (*Pale King* 259 fn 2). Like sincerity in an insincere environment, however, the refusal to appeal in a culture centered on popularity remains paradoxical.

James Dorson asks whether Wallace's critique of this desire, when implemented in literary texts, might not just be another way of trying to be liked by readers who share this sentiment. In other words, might Wallace's critique of instrumentalized emotions be tainted by an agenda itself (65–67)? After all, the often informal and intimate tone comes from an author who presented himself as a perfectionist subjecting every text to heavy and repeated revisions (McCaffery 140). Wallace's intersubjective impetus seeks the readers' proximity and, one suspects, their approval. In Dorson's view, the value of Wallace's fiction does ultimately not lie in escaping the trap of popularity culture. Instead, his passionate efforts to break out of it simply illustrate his thorough entrapment (77). The culture industry's embrace of the late Wallace confirms this. Putting aside this process's inherent simplifications, the quick transformation of his complex writings into palatable entertainment suggests that there is a demand for his difficult yet intimate narratives: After Wallace's death in 2008, several writers as well as his publisher inflated or re-arranged previously published texts into book-length accounts. David Lipsky extended a magazine feature into an entire book, which, notwithstanding Wallace's deep ambivalence toward televisual entertainment, was even adapted into a movie. In turn, Wallace's publisher Little Brown issued a collection of aphorisms sourced from a commencement speech he gave in 2005.

Yet in contrast to the comfort of the culture industry's Wallace, readers of his fiction do not get to enjoy intimacy effects all that easily. True to Wallace's "desperate desire to please coupled with a kind of hostility to the reader" (in McCaffery 130), the author's notes included in many of *The Pale King*'s editions illustrate how Wallace set out to design a confusing and overpowering novel. Fittingly, Pietsch reports how Wallace "referred to the novel as 'tornadic' or having a

'tornado feeling'" (xii) indicating both force and pace. The imagery works, for the novel's middle remains somewhat empty. Whereas *The Pale King* has no clear protagonists, most characters orbit the IRS as the novel's focal point side by side without interacting with each other. Wallace planned to disappoint certain reader expectations: "Central Deal: Realism, monotony. Plot a series of set-ups for stuff happening, but nothing actually happens" (548). In another note, he writes that "something big *threatens* to happen but doesn't actually happen" (546, original emphasis). In other words, Wallace not only left an unfinished novel in the sense that he did not live to finalize it; much like the works he published during his lifetime, *The Pale King* mandates its readers to put in their share of work.

McGurl follows this line of thought when he highlights that the description of *The Pale King* "seems insufficient without some account also of his readers, that social body to which [Wallace's] works are directed and in which they seek completion" ("Institution" 29). To achieve this completion, the readers must engage in serious hermeneutics. This can be understood as a dialogic or participatory quality that Timmer views as part of Wallace's effort to overcome the solipsistic quality of postmodern literature (77), but this overlooks that the reader's contribution closely resembles an assignment. This might seem an odd term for a novel, but it points to the framework of institutional discipline underlying Wallace's relationship to the reader. In addition to several episodes demonstrating that the student Wallace rebelled all too frequently against institutional authorities himself, Daniel T. Max's biography includes a suitable anecdote. Responding to comments about *Infinite Jest*'s apparent lack of an ending, Wallace states:

> There is an ending as far as I'm concerned. Certain kind[s] of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an 'end' can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, *then the book's failed for you* (Max, *Every* 321 n19, emphasis added).

The text here becomes an assignment the reader/student 'solves' and then submits to the author/instructor for review, and Wallace barely veils his expectation about the reader's 'task' to tie up the novel's loose ends: If "the book's failed for you," you have conversely not only failed the book, but also its creator. Wallace himself remained anxious about the approval of literary authorities, "the interpretive dialogue of author and critic seemed to haunt" him throughout his career (Finn 161). Although *Infinite Jest* did not initially receive the kind of praise his posthumous fame would suggest, Wallace had received the approval he desperately sought by early 1996. He

commented that the novel "felt done" only after an early endorsement by the influential critic Sven Birkerts (in Lipsky 253).

Such exams remain metaphorical of course. But the contractual logic underlying Wallace's writing nevertheless exercises pressure. In his own words, some contemporary writers "are involved in transactions requiring genius, but it seems to me to be sort of required on both sides" (in Kelly, "David" 146). While Kelly takes note of the statement's economic logic, "reading is a transaction, an economy like any other in which goods are sold and received," his understanding of "the gift of sincerity" as supposedly transcending this logic remains trapped in optimism and prevents a discussion of the labor underlying this "transaction" (146). (Section 6.1 on Browning's *The Gift* investigates such optimistic conceptions of gift economy in more detail.) In apparent agreement with both Kelly and Wallace, Max states that *Infinite Jest*, "for all its putative difficulty, cares about the reader, and if it denies him or her a conventional ending, it doesn't do so out of malice; it does it out of concern, to provide a deeper palliative than realistic storytelling can" (215). Inadvertently evoking Weber's theory of the protestant work ethic, Max argues that just like in the half-way house central to *Infinite Jest*, "you have to work to get better. The book is redemptive, as modern novels rarely are" (215). This assessment easily expands to other texts of Wallace's fiction: To understand what it is about—in his oft-quoted words, "what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (in McCaffery 131, original emphasis)—requires long and hard work.

Like in virtually all cases of consuming "putative[ly] difficult" literature, the reader's laborious relation to Wallace's fiction does evidently not equate wage labor. Given *The Pale King*'s setting in the era of financialization and its focus on work, however, Leigh Claire La Berge's notion of "decommodified labor" can illuminate the reader's relation to the novel. La Berge presents the concept as a "way to think labor that becomes available after financialization" and examines the increasing resemblance of activities that are recognizable as work but are not paid as such. For her, decommodified labor is "a new configuration of value-extraction, in which the wage is diminished but the formal organization of work, its rhythms, commitments, and narratives remain." In contrast to the obvious examples of academic peer-review or internships (La Berge), the question of how and to what ends value is extracted when reading *The Pale King* is not immediately clear. But the contractual logic described above and the readers' relationship to their 'boss' Wallace chimes with

La Berge's notion, and so does the novel's rhythm of demanding exertion and granting breaks in exchange.

As one of several short but dense fragments designed to give the reader pause, *The Pale King*'s twenty-fifth chapter illustrates this pattern of overburden followed by relief. On about three pages, the text relates how various IRS examiners, most of whom are unfamiliar to the reader, "turn a page" while processing tax returns: "Howard Cardwell turns a page. Ken Wax turns a page. Matt Redgate turns a page […]" (312). Jeffrey Severs views this chapter to not only hold up a mirror to "its reader, who also repeatedly 'turns a page.'" Moreover, this form of "meta*reading*" is an attempt of "*other*-consciousness—that is, consciousness of the eyes that will stare down at the page once [Wallace's] work is through, forming a community of their own, making the rote into ritual, and potentially sharing values as well." For Severs, this idiosyncratic chapter was Wallace's way of showing "readers once again the stakes and necessity of their work—and how they too might be […] overcoming solipsism through reading (209–10, emphases in original). Before addressing the ambivalence of the teamwork evoked here, another effect of this chapter should be highlighted. Intermittently, a different kind of tedium interjects to inform the reader that, for example, a "yawn proceed across one Chalk's row by unconscious influence" (312) or about the "[a]mbient room temperature [of] 80° F" (313). This pattern breaks only once, near the chapter's end when the text states without context, that "[e]very love story is a ghost story" (314). This points to other fragments, such as the two ghosts haunting the floors of the "overwhelmingly complex and repetitive" IRS building (291). But dedicated readers recognize the cryptic phrase also from other texts of Wallace's. For Max, who uses the phrase as the title for his Wallace biography, it exemplifies "the futility of Wallace's quest. What writer ever had a more passionate affair with language? For him, a thing wasn't alive if he couldn't write it down" ("D.F.W"). Although Max's point remains vague except for his palpable admiration of Wallace, his train of thought illustrates how *The Pale King* rewards the endurance of seemingly pointless information with insinuating nods to the informed reader.

McGurl rightly states that the human interest surrounding many discussions of Wallace frequently obscures how enthusiastically he fulfilled the "role of [an] educational disciplinarian; a role which, in a sense, he continues to perform from beyond the grave whenever his readers attempt to live up to the demands of his novels" ("Institution" 41). This allocation worked well: Diligent

disciples continue to accept Wallace's assignment and engage with his literary challenges, as *Infinite Jest*'s online reading group "Infinite Summer" (2009) illustrates. Just under a year after Wallace's death, thousands of readers came together online to achieve what most of them felt was too hard to do individually: to honor Wallace by reading and understanding *Infinite Jest* in its entirety (Fitzpatrick). Comparable, though smaller, initiatives existed for *The Pale King,* and the prominence of boredom, complexity and confusion certainly justifies the communal effort. Similarly to the characters' struggle with the mind-numbing abstraction and monotony omnipresent in the IRS, the readers wrestle with the "complex psychodynamics involved in taxation" (112), confusing digressions and a heavily fragmented plot designed to remain inconclusive.

Crucially, in Wallace's understanding, the laborious journey *is* the reward. In a note for *The Pale King* he writes: "It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom" (548). The novel conveys this idiosyncratic insight, its moral fundament, in various ways. Chris Fogle is 'converted' to a life of civic duty after an epiphany about the "heroism" of dull work. In addition to the obvious Christian reference, one of many, his story contains strong militaristic undertones. Once enlightened, Fogle immediately gets a haircut and applies for "the Service." The text at times reveals ironic distance from his newly found enthusiasm for the dry complexity of tax collection, but Fogle's odd patriotism remains valorized. "David Wallace" concurs when he articulates his suspicion that there might be more to the avoidance of dullness than is conventionally admitted (87). Even the IRS's fictional motto joins this train of thought: "*He is the one doing a difficult, unpopular job*" (246, original emphasis). It stays unclear whether Toni Ware similarly embraces the IRS's organizing element but given the relative safety constitutive for boredom and the hints at her exceptional skills as an examiner, bureaucracy appears to offer a safe space for her, too. In addition to Ware, the director of the IRS outpost DeWitt Glendenning, Jr. is the novel's only self-sufficient character. He, who neither seeks the approval of others (433–38), nor is undercut by a narrative irony, links the endurance of boredom to everyone's civic "duty" (133):

> It may sound reactionary, I know. But we can all feel it. We've changed the way we think of ourselves as citizens. We don't think of ourselves as citizens in the old sense of being small parts of something larger and infinitely more important to which we have serious responsibilities. We do still think of ourselves as citizens in the sense of being beneficiaries—we're actually conscious of our rights as American citizens and the nation's responsibilities to us and ensuring we get our share of the American pie […] It's probably part of my naïveté that I don't want to put the issue in political terms when it's probably irreducibly political. Something has happened where we've decided on a personal level that it's all right to abdicate our individual responsibility to the common

> good and let government worry about the common good while we all go about our individual self-interested business and struggle to gratify our various appetites (138).

When his conversational partner remarks how this topic makes for dull conversation, Glendenning responds: "Sometimes what's important is dull. Sometimes it's work. Sometimes the important things aren't works of art for your entertainment" (140). His role as the author's literary mouthpiece is apparent, not least because Wallace promoted such virtues nearly verbatim (*This* 120). Using tax as a suitable example, the novel renders the endurance of tedious or inconvenient labor as serving both the individual and the collective good. This celebration of strenuous but meaningful labor ostensibly amounts to a condemnation of consumer culture: *The Pale King* denies the shallow pleasures of mindless consumption and instead demands a fair amount of resilience against boredom and abstraction. Given its therapeutic undertones, the implied return to some kind of producerism remains a fantasy and primarily indicates how the formal challenges of Wallace's fiction served to mask an unease with its own thorough integration into consumer culture.

This in turn begs the question why so many readers accept the challenge of this often overwhelming and confusing literature. Encounters between text and reader are contingent and not everyone likes to be reminded of "hated school assignment[s]" (Finn 171). However, the text structures these encounters, and the literary authority figure Wallace emphasizes the open dialectic between text and reader while minutely shaping the exchange. In contrast to his mostly clumsy characters, he successfully conveys his message about the merits of disciplined work. This is evident in his style and reception, and both intertwine in John Holliday's understanding of "authorial connectedness:"

> In its most emotionally intimate moments, in those that constitute authorial connectedness, reading a work of fiction can feel as though you are engaging with the thoughts of a person whose beliefs and attitudes intersect with yours, whose personality you find mesmerizing, and who expresses content you value and does so in a way that you believe you would if you could, if you had such expressive power (10).

Kathleen Fitzpatrick points to how Wallace's "presence" frequently overextends in a form of "over-identification:" "many of [Wallace's] readers experience a sense of intimate connection with his writing, a connection that can very easily bleed over into a relationship, however imagined, with the man himself" (184–85). Ed Finn's findings on (mis)perceived narrative proximity support these thoughts: His analysis of online recommendations and reviews of Wallace's texts concludes that "Wallace is *different*" to writers of comparable style or position in that "Wallace leads on to

more Wallace for most readers," proving the "particular kind of challenge-based relationship with many of his readers" a success (152, 168–69, original emphasis). All of this suggests that Wallace's eloquent complaints about how post-industrialism's regime of soft skills colonizes and corrupts intersubjective encounters concealed his personal mastery of the very communicative skills involved. By meeting the readers' anticipated emotional dispositions with the (mediated) interpersonal skill of openly addressing them, Wallace's authorial persona reveals himself to be a proficient emotional laborer. In an essay on talk radio Wallace writes, "[c]onsider the special intimacy […] This is a human being speaking to you, with a pro-caliber voice, eloquently and with passion, in what feels like a one-to-one; it doesn't take long before you start to feel you know him [the host]" (*Consider* 294). This perspective on talk radio's 'special asset' holds up for many other media forms. More importantly, it accurately describes Wallace's very own literature. The very discomfort his texts convey about the contemporary state of interpersonal discourse is central here. His texts create intimacy effects through what presents itself as the uncomfortable honesty and frequent self-deprecation of almost all relatable and especially autobiographical characters.

Holliday argues that the intimacy emanating from "authorial connectedness" is produced by "the reader recognizing something of herself in the work, something she believed or thought or felt before reading the work, for authorial connectedness turns on the reader feeling as though she has found, in some sense, a fellow soul" (3). As shown, many of *The Pale King*'s characters are sympathetically helpless and subject to the rule of larger powers. Unsurprisingly, Wallace's credible portrait of daily white-collar grievances, combined with emotional reflexivity and finely tuned sense for humor and irony, not only speaks to many knowledge workers, but also offers consolation. For here is an author who accurately describes the increasing stress emanating from human interactions, the steady fragmentation of one's work and private life, the difficulty of remaining grounded in ever-accelerating real time. An author, in other words, who speaks to their estrangement.

This readerly recognition is enabled by the emotional labor of Wallace's authorial persona. When successful, it effects narrative quality time: the reader's intellectual work bears a sense of intimacy. Because Wallace pastoralizes the dreary but secure work environment of bureaucracy at a time when capitalist structures favor flexibility, this comfort is in part nostalgic (Dorson, "Neoliberal"). Such affect presumably reinforce the text's appeal: Through his fiction, Wallace

offers a symbolic reconciliation of the incompatible contradictions dominating his readers' (work) lives. In a wider context, Wallace's skill can be seen as literary expressions of what management historians Daniel Wren and Arthur Bedeian discuss as a recent step in industrial psychology's evolution: "a new mix of managerial skills […] crucial to handling human situations: first diagnostic skills in understanding human behavior and second, interpersonal skill in counseling, motivating, leading, and communicating" (298). The conjecture between Wallace's consolatory fiction and the interest in gentle, shepherding leaders in current management (Bröckling 152) theory might appear exaggerated, but it is borne out discursively: Alexander Styhre's essay on what Wallace "can teach Management Scholars" illustrates that the author's painstaking observations on the estranging tendencies of present-day work environments are of interest not only for those who merely enjoy his writing.

Befitting the essay's publishing venue in the *Academy of Management Review*, Styhre seeks to discern how Wallace's writing might inspire more engaging language in management studies. The first value he identifies in Wallace, namely the ability to address a certain zeitgeist of anxious ennui, is evident. But Styhre's admiration for, secondly, Wallace's meticulous focus on the seemingly banal, and, thirdly, the promotion of what Styhre, with reference to Aristotle's understanding of *eudaimonia*, summarizes as "happiness based on a modest way of life," helps to explore the managerial affinities inherent in Wallace's writing (170). The three points obviously connect: Wallace's engaging style makes seemingly dull (work) realities interesting and facilitates an ethics of community and contentment. Styhre recognizes that an appropriate language is essential:

> Wallace's nonfiction writing informs management thinking and scholarship by inviting management researchers to actively reinvent and reform the language at hand in order to better capture the individuals populating organizations and engaging in management practices. The work of Wallace can inspire new ways to capture everyday life in organizations (173).

Styhre bases his claim that Wallace was an exemplary ethnographer on the author's idiosyncratic and highly-stylized non-fiction (176). Notwithstanding this debatable leap, his expressed interest in Wallace's skill to valorize the boring and thereby recognizing the reader's often mundane daily grind bespeaks a therapeutic tone. The tacit belief that institutions such as the IRS or the corporations Styhre studies are suited to build the sought-after community indicates a correspondingly modest view on what this community might achieve. Conversely, it exposes

readings that praise the novel's insights on how to "replace the individual liberty of selfishness in favour of a selflessness in service of collective emancipation" to be overly enthusiastic (Shapiro 1268). More accurately, *The Pale King* echoes what Wendy Brown calls a "national-theological discourse" of moralized, individual sacrifice to the collective good. Personal duty is the solution to political crisis, as opposed to debate, contestation, let alone emancipation (Brown, "Sacrificial" 4). Though the novel conveys obvious discontent with the intensification of economic and social individualization, its reliance on personal ethics to bring about meaningful change burdens the individual further and therefore troubles readings of *The Pale King* as defying neoliberal paradigms. McGurl's quips that the novel essentially tells its reader to stay humble and "*pay more taxes*" ("Institution" 52, original emphasis). Despite an appreciation for this message's "quixotic glory" (52), he notes how Wallace's often desperate faith in the stabilizing effect of "therapeutic communit[ies]" defuses collective politics "into a series of individual ethical choices" (36). *The Pale King* illustrated the individual sense of duty toward the greater good through the welfare state's bureaucratic backbone. Personal duty somehow solves the perceived political crisis.

Dorson has called attention to New Sincerity's affinities toward the demands of emotional capitalism ("Neoliberal" 226–27) and the intimate relationship to the author who understands the reader's estranging experiences in everyday life surely helps explain the homogenous make-up of Wallace's readers. Recalling the social stratification inherent in emotional capitalism, it is not surprising that many scholars as well as Wallace himself presume his reader to be mostly white, educated, male and middle-class (Haddad 8; Wallace in Lipsky 82). If practices of intimacy such as the quality time of reading a novel are emotional capitalism's training grounds and get distributed unevenly along class lines (Illouz, *Saving*), the vast academic discourse accompanying Wallace should not be surprising either. The fact that it is a privilege to have the time and disposition to carefully read a difficult novel is of course not to be blamed on Wallace. Yet his (scholarly) readership should reflect on this when making larger claims about his work. Given academia's social exclusivity, the ever-growing group of scholars working on Wallace might, except for age, closely resemble his presumed readership. Critics frequently confirm Wallace's communicative skills and emotional competence by declaring a "special relationship" with him. Nicoline Timmer's *Do You Feel It Too?*, for example includes an "In Memoriam" for Wallace in which she thanks him "for being such a wonderful, hyper-intelligent, hypersensitive (and also extremely funny) interlocutor in all his work" (10). Another indicator for Wallace's communicative

success is the degree to which, until today, scholarship on him relies on his own interpretations of his fiction: his 1993 essay on TV and irony and the lengthy interview with Larry McCaffery of the same year shaped the scholarship for decades (Kelly, “Death”). The persistently high number of Wallace quotes within scholarly discourse shows that he knew very well how to make his point—and that his insights found an appreciative audience.

In one of his many digressions, Chris Fogle remarks: “If you really look at something, you can almost always tell what type of wage structure the person who made it was on” (184). To the devoted reader who labors through the novel with the goal to eventually recognize and appreciate Wallace’s empathy for middle-class discontent, the statement marks as a self-referential milestone along the way toward their “intimate conversation” with Wallace.

4. Networking and its Discontents in Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

> Love and love rivalries, the relationship between the new and the old, the way the new becomes old and the novel habit—in short, time as linear and as cyclical—that is one of the keys to nostalgia.
>
> Barbara Cassin. *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?*

As the author of five novels and two volumes of short fiction, Jennifer Egan has enjoyed positive reviews and commercial success since her debut in the early 1990s. Until recent years, however, scholars have largely overlooked her. The initial neglect of her artistic skill and obvious self-awareness as a writer 'after postmodernism' seems to prove that the canon of cutting-edge fiction still is a "(white) male preserve" (Kelly, "Beginning" 416–17). It was the Pulitzer Prize winning *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010) that initiated what has by now amounted to considerable academic interest in Egan's writing. Her fiction poses questions about the interplay of technology and (post)humanism, culture and commerce as well as the competition of 'authentic' reality with digital mediation (Butchard 360). The nostalgic sense of loss that frequently accompanies these dialectics is central to her fiction. Egan presents herself as an old-fashioned writer disinterested in computers who drafts her texts in long hand (Fox, Cox, Reilly 442), but her oeuvre is acutely aware of the consequences of technological progress and in fact frequently offers "freakishly" accurate predictions about coming technological innovations (Egan in Fox).[19] *Look at Me* (2001), for example, not only anticipates reality TV, blogging and social media years before they reached today's ubiquity, it also reflects on the consequences of erasing the boundary between 'real life' and commercially mediated virtual realities. Published within weeks of 9/11, Egan also apologetically assures her readers in a hastily added afterword that the plot line about a planned terrorist attack on New York City's World Trade Center "remains an imaginative artifact of a more innocent time" (517). Giving her "intuition and unconscious free rein" when writing (in Dinnen), Egan's plausibly hypothesizes where current social transformations might eventually lead.

[19] Contrary to this self-depiction, Egan has in fact witnessed technological progress at its frontier: In the early 1980s, Silicon Valley's demigod Steve Jobs himself gifted Egan a then cutting-edge Macintosh (Schuessler).

Egan is claimed to respond to the New Sincerity (Kelly, "New" 2016), but despite the mentioned increase in academic attention, an assessment of how her texts actually engage the challenges to intersubjective intimacy posed by an ever-evolving regime of information technology is missing. This chapter hence shows how Egan employs the notion of the "network" to mediate contemporary obstacles and opportunities to intimacy. Section 4.1 surveys the attempts at categorizing *Goon Squad* and argues that it is best understood as a network narrative. A discussion of the intersections between literary studies' current interest in both form and network theory, as well as *Goon Squad*'s affinities to both discourses will substantiate this claim. Egan utilizes the network form to stage unlikely encounters laden with the potential for intimacy. However, because the networks within her text frequently overstrain those they entangle, these opportunities remain unfulfilled, marking the network as a site of failed intimacies. Section 4.2 examines a projection of intimate desire onto material objects, section 4.3 turns to two temporal displacements: *Goon Squad* suggests that both a nostalgic longing for the past (section 4.3.1) and a naïve hopefulness for the future (section 4.3.2) distract from the complexity of the present moment.

Section 4.4 widens the analytical scope and reflects on how the text performatively interrogates "network culture's" burdens for the individual. Section 4.4.1 reads *Goon Squad* as a literary exploration of the strenuous and endless mandate to always seek new connections. Given these excessive demands, the characters' failure to comprehend and navigate their entanglements becomes relatable for *Goon Squad*'s readership that, as section 4.4.2 shows, Egan involves in several ways. Section 4.5 then explores a remedy for network culture's apparent totality: Throughout the text, shared aesthetic experiences effect intimacy. Music is the most important agent for this effect, but *Goon Squad* also self-reflexively draws attention to itself and thereby highlights similar potentials for literature.

4.1. Narrative Networks

Goon Squad spans three continents and around five decades in thirteen non-linear chapters. Conspicuous shifts in style, focalization and settings emphasize their respective autonomy. Egan both engages with established styles and experiments with new ways of storytelling. One chapter playfully alludes to the influence of Wallace's "formal power" through numerous footnotes, an intertextual reference that refuses to be "tyrannized by his legacy" (Konstantinou, "Wallace's" 60). Conversely, a chapter-as-slideshow epitomizes *Goon Squad*'s formal originality. Throughout, the

book orbits the evolution of punk rock and the music industry through the late 20th and the 21st century: the chronologically earliest chapter takes place in the early 1970s, the last depicts a near-future of the 2020s. Though technology does not play an explicit role in all chapters, it underpins the entire book. Every story somehow relates how paradigms of the ever-advancing information technology influence the characters' communication, relationships and perception of themselves and others. *Goon Squad* engages with various digital media systems and thus mimics, as Regina Schober notes, "the multimedia collage of the Internet" whose varying arrangements of textuality, visuality and linearity require "different forms of 'reading'" in quick succession ("Nostalgic" 373). Given the text's pronounced interest in technological innovation, she rightly points to Liu's notion of the narrativized "new media encounter," for *Goon Squad* indeed tells a story of ambivalent modernization and charts the messy and unpredictable "borderland" between the analog and the digital (*Friending* 36–39; cf. Schober, "Nostalgic" 360).

Although only one chapter is focalized through each, Bennie Salazar and his assistant Sasha Grady come closest to being *Goon Squad*'s protagonists. Both work for a music label during the drastic transformations brought about by music's digitization. Whereas Sasha, first introduced as a disaffected adult haunted by childhood traumas, gradually achieves the stability her past lacked, Bennie's emotional trajectory is inverse. In the 1970s, he played in a teen punk band and goes on to become a successful producer, but later turns into one of the music industry's self-loathers selling aesthetically "bloodless constructions" (24). The loss he mourns points to the ever-accelerating consumer culture obsessed with youthfulness. Throughout all stories, time functions as an autonomous and ruthless agent whose relentless progress leaves virtually all characters wondering how their youth could possibly have passed so quickly. Several of them quip in frustration that "time's a goon, right?" (134, 341).

Goon Squad's formal idiosyncrasy puzzles many scholars. Some, like Jennifer Smith, draw on the "history of the short story cycle" to link its interest in nostalgia and its "desire for a lost authenticity" to historical precursors like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (141–69). Nader M. Helmy in turn relies on Dunn and Morris' work on the "composite novel" and the image of the mosaic to make a similar case about *Goon Squad*'s literary predecessors (38–52). Nicholas Dames conversely highlights its affinities to the Bildungsroman ("Theory" 164). Other critics emphasize Egan's innovations: Ted Gioia views *Goon Squad* as exemplary for "The Rise of the Fragmented

Novel" which, in contradistinction to its experimental forerunners in modernism and postmodernism ultimately pursues coherence and coalescence: "It resists disunity, even as it appears to embody it." Employing a similar image, Nicolas Potkalitsky borrows from Corinne Bancroft to read *Goon Squad* as a "braided narrative" that gains semantic coherence and aesthetic appeal through the plaiting of at times opposing narrative perspectives and voices (91–122). Michael David Lukas in turn calls it a "polyphonic novel" that "uses a chorus of voices and narrative styles to create a whole that's greater than the sum of its parts." Though these interpretations each illuminate the text in part, their mutual incompatibility reveals *Goon Squad*'s formal ambiguity to be its most intriguing characteristic. Conversely, the resistance to generic stability expressed in the text's varying themes, moods and sprawling shape, can be best explored as a *network narrative*. The network's "inherently emergent" form (Jagoda 8) enabled Egan "to avoid centrality" (in Julavits) when drafting her sleek literary exploration of new media knowledge systems (Schober, "Nostalgic" 373). Yet importantly, *Goon Squad* is neither hypertext (see Ciccoricco), nor merely focused on digital infrastructure. Instead, the text gestures toward contemporary structures of networked sociality and thus calls for a consideration of the network form itself.

Understood as complex structures to be found, for example, in ecological systems, networks may have virtually existed forever. Though the OED points to early technological appropriations, "network" only gradually takes on the now all-important definition of a "netlike or complex system or collection of interrelated things, as topographical features, lines of transportation, or telecommunications routes" ("network"). The industrialization of transport and communication revealed networks to be "a constitutive dimension of the process of modernization" (Reichardt et al. 12) and, although they entail a metaphoric use of "network" as a social form, the emergence of network theories follows a similar timeline. In the social sciences, network theory draws from sources such as structural sociology to posit that social relations rather than internalized norms guide human behavior (Mizruchi). In the humanities, some scholars identify network theories *avant la lettre* among American intellectuals of the 19th century or recognize "proto-network thinking" in American modernism (Schober, "Transcending"; "America"; Beal and Lavin). More recently, the network paradigm has inspired entire theory schools: Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* praises rhizomatic networks as productively troubling the binaries of western philosophy (Leitch et al. 1448). Postcolonial scholar Édouard Glissant draws from Deleuze and Guattari to

argue against essentialized forms of identity (Jagoda 15) and Paul Gilroy similarly explores identity questions through interdependence. As discussed in section 2.4.2, actor-network-theory has gained influence and, in activist terms, Hardt and Negri seek to mobilize the network for political contest.

Networks are therefore neither "exclusively endemic to the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries" nor "somehow synonymous with the technologies of modernity or postmodernity, such as the telegraph or the Internet" (Galloway 282). However, postmodernization has not only increased networks' relevance further, it also inverted the term's formerly pejorative connotation; for until the late 20th century, networks were associated with vice. "Americans are very uncomfortable with the idea that networks can be powerful […] Networks are predominantly identified with conspiracies, racism, elitism, and market-rigging" (Lifson qtd. in Liu, *Laws* 147) and only recently have their openness and adaptability gained praise (Boltanski and Chiapello 141–43). Patrick Jagoda traces today's vague yet ubiquitous and powerful "network imaginary" back to the emergence of network science as a theoretical framework, the internet's proliferation into everyday culture as well as the rise of neoliberal paradigms in a postindustrial economy (10–14). This third point about an economic transformation will be explored later (see section 4.4), so suffice it for now to point out how the "network imaginary" is rhetorically substantiated by various *network narratives*, that is to say ideologemes affirming the centrality of networks for post-Fordist societies: "the mantra of the present is that everything is interconnected" (Jagoda 30). But because "network" can at least refer to either (infra)structure or social form, the term's concrete meaning often remains blurry. "Network" is justifiably counted among the *Keywords for Today* (MacCabe et al. 254–57), but its discursive ubiquity causes it to "increasingly lack[] descriptive edge" (Jagoda 4). This assessment explains the frequent evocation of networks in connection with fuzzily optimistic imagery such as the "cloud" or the "global village" that disguise rather than illuminate what networks are and how they relate to the material world (Hu; Carruth).[20] Following Jagoda's proposition that some contemporary artistic explorations of "network aesthetics" clarify such obfuscations (5), this chapter shows how Egan's *Goon Squad* defamiliarizes the ostensibly naturalized "network imaginary" by laying bare its effects on involuntarily networked individuals and communities.

[20] Marshall McLuhan, who coined the term "global village" with an unidirectional media landscape in mind, notably expressed more ambivalence about the concept than today's use implies (in Stearn 272).

Depending on the perspective, the recent focus on network theory in literary studies either coincides with or is a strain of the renewed interest in form. Levine's 2015 *Forms* has come to exemplify this "new formalism." Levine combines formalist approaches with design theory to offer an analytical perspective on how "the affordances of form" can reconcile the time-worn debate about the problematic hierarchization of form (aesthetics) and context (sociality). She argues that because different forms constantly interact, compete and "collide," no homogenizing force can by itself plausibly dominate a literary text—or society at large (1–23). Exploring the "formless, perhaps even the antithesis of form" that is the network, Levine contends that, despite their perpetual reconfiguration and shapeshifting, "we can understand networks as distinct forms—as defined patterns of interconnection and exchange that organize social and aesthetic experience" (112, 113):

> As a form that first and foremost affords connectedness, the network provides a way to understand how many other formal elements […] link up in larger formations. Specifically, network organization allows us to consider how many formal elements connect to create nations or cultures. It is thus a form absolutely crucial to our grasp of significant assemblages—including society itself (113).

This theorization suits *Goon Squad*'s expanding narrative. Each of the book's chapters maps a different group of characters, one of whom then emerges as the "*hub*" that constitutes the link to the larger network (Levine 113, original emphasis). After Sasha offhandedly reports in the first chapter how "Bennie Salazar, her old boss, […] sprinkled gold flakes into his coffee—as an aphrodisiac, she suspected—and sprayed pesticide in his armpits" (5), she then reappears in the chapter focalized through him. Adapting Levine's network theory terminology, Sasha and Bennie are *Goon Squad*'s "*hinges*, nodes that connect otherwise separate groups;" their "*network centrality*" is measured in individual connections (113, emphases in original).

In accordance with Levine's suggestion that networks can frame "other formal elements," *Goon Squad*'s hybrid form and scale amounts to a network of networks. Through narrative units of various sizes, each chapter's nodes engage their local environments, but these local connections are frequently transcended by networks of a higher order, which converge to form the network that encompasses the entirety of *Goon Squad*. In turn, this assemblage has only grown further since its publication: Because it "never really felt done" to her, Egan was compelled to create "an expansion of" *Goon Squad* through the 2022 follow-up *The Candy House* (Egan in Plotz 3:53). The book not only revisits various familiar characters, settings and objects, it also remains thematically and

formally obsessed with the network form itself. The narrative charts the rise of the internet (and later social media) from the early 1990s, when only visionaries perceived the "invisible web of connection" underlying social relations (6), to their oppressive ubiquity in a "Self-Surveillance Era" of the near future in which "[t]hings are more connected than they seem" and only a few "eluders" withstand the allure of the book's titular sweet deal (30, 233, 79): access to other people's memories in exchange for a digital copy of one's own consciousness. *The Candy House* also signals Egan's continuation of her formal experiments: The book's only recycled story, "Lulu the Spy, 2032" was first published as "Black Box" through one of *The New Yorker*'s Twitter accounts and fittingly encompasses 606 tweet-sized paragraphs of 140 characters or less (*The Candy House*, imprint).

Whether *Goon Squad's* various parts coalesce into a coherent "bounded whole" with stable borders (Levine 24–48) remains an open question: Section 4.4.2 shows that it depends on the individual reader if and to what degree its various narratives attain cohesion and closure. In any case, the text's overarching structure shows everyone to be associated through the proverbial friend of a friend by usually less than "six degrees of separation" (Sacks 1481–82). Whereas *Goon Squad*'s interconnected stories form a *network of narratives*, its prominent deliberation of technological, cultural and social complexity produce a *narrative of networks* on the level of content. In addition to the contemporary pertinence of the network form as a social structure addressed in the remainder of this chapter, such reflexivity lends the notion more analytical potential than the rather stable notions of "mosaic," "braided narrative" or "jigsaw puzzle" when addressing *Goon Squad*'s peculiar structure (Helmy; Potkalitsky; Gioia).

Beyond *Goon Squad*'s overall topology, Egan employs the network paradigm on the levels of characters, narrative and even for interactions with her (implied) readers. The text repeatedly connects seemingly unrelated matters by insinuating hidden intersections. Schober's assertion that such convergences create "an associative and emergent sense of community" holds true for some instances ("Nostalgic" 373), but frequently this communal feeling is either too ephemeral to actually be seized, or absent altogether. The network form repeatedly frustrates the palpable desire for meaningful relations pervading *Goon Squad*. The following key scene illustrates this pattern by intimating a surprising but powerful link between the decline of rock music and the contingency of post-9/11 America. Driving back into Manhattan with Sasha after a disappointing meeting with

a band outside the city, Bennie silently muses about "his *hatred* for the industry he'd given his life to" as they listen to some of their label's music, "down to the singles he'd just today been petitioning radio stations to add, husks of music, lifeless and cold as the squares of office neon cutting the blue twilight":

> 'It's incredible,' Sasha said, 'how there's just nothing there.'
>
> Astounded, Bennie turned to her. Was it possible that she'd followed his musical rant to its grim conclusion? Sasha was looking downtown, and he followed her eyes to the empty space where the Twin Towers had been. 'There should be *something*, you know?' she said, not looking at Bennie. 'Like an echo. Or an outline' (38, emphases in original).

Bennie is "relieved she hadn't understood" the connection between the songs and his grievances about the loss of music's analog "muddiness" and judges this exchange to be a misunderstanding (38, 23). While their peculiar emotional overlap remains unrecognized—Sasha cannot read Bennie's mind—the narrative offers the potential for resolution: The evocation of death and absence in the "husks of music" and the "lifeless and cold" corporate world finds its parallel in Sasha's ongoing bewilderment about the absence of the Twin Towers. Before Sasha even articulates her incredulity about "the empty space" the World Trade Center left behind, the text indicates an associative link through the many "squares of office neon cutting the blue twilight" it once housed. Moreover, Sasha first voices her *horror vacui* in auditive terms and demands something "like an echo" before proposing to fill the chasm in Manhattan's skyline with "an outline." Some scholars suggest that the characters "achieve a certain conceptual understanding" through their privileging of sound over sight when addressing their respective senses of loss (Masterson 72, cf. Johnston 168). But Sasha and Bennie themselves remain ignorant of their 'achievement.' Instead, it is up to the reader to recognize this missed opportunity of shared mourning.

This passage is exemplary for what *Goon Squad* accomplishes in various ways: The seemingly accidental alignment of feelings and desires suggests meaningful convergences—though often only to the reader. Egan utilizes a motive that, according to David Bordwell, has gained cinematic popularity in recent decades: In "converging-fates plots," such instances of momentary recognition establish a sense of order within network narratives that may remain beyond the characters' grasp, but aid the audience's understanding (98–103, cf. Schober, "Nostalgic" 373).

4.2. Intimate Materiality

Whether intentionally pursuing such convergences or not, virtually everyone and everything in *Goon Squad* is connective. A suitable example is Sasha's unconscious desire for relationships channeled through kleptomania, a compulsion masking her yearning for the tactility of physical intimacy. After a traumatic youth leaves her insecure about personal relationships, she feels fetishistic "pride" and "tenderness" for the stolen goods "she'd risked everything" for. They contain "the raw, warped core of her life" (15–16). Sasha's diverted desire is coupled with the relished thrill of transgression in the act of stealing: "it seemed so dull, so life-as-usual to just leave it there rather than seize the moment, accept the challenge" (3). In Sasha's compulsive logic, she relates to others through (involuntarily) shared objects. This rationale illuminates why she does not prioritize monetary value but relational significance when choosing her loot, collecting physical mementos of specific interactions or situations, however ephemeral. Sasha "no longer took anything from stores—their cold, inert goods didn't tempt her. Only from people." As a result, her collection includes "five sets of keys, fourteen pairs of sunglasses, a child's striped scarf, binoculars, a cheese grater, a pocketknife, twenty-eight bars of soap, and eighty-five pens" (4). These trivial items indicate Sasha's situational fascination which hinges on each object's respective material quality. The tactile encounters with physical objects momentarily soothe her desire for intimate engagements. A "beautiful screwdriver" she steals from a plumber serves as an apt example: Sasha cannot resist "the orange translucent handle gleaming like a lollipop in its worn leather loop, the silvery shaft sculpted, sparkling" (8). Yet these momentary thrills are unsustainable and, as the adrenaline subsides, her regret is overwhelming.

In the chapter ironically titled "Found Objects," Sasha recounts to her therapist how the excitement about an opportunity for theft transformed a "lame date" arranged online into a "scene that tingled with mirthful possibility" (5). On said night, she cannot withstand the temptation of an unguarded "fat, tender wallet, offering itself to her hand" in a restroom (3). As the repeated description of the "tender" wallet indicates, Sasha's fascination derives from its materiality rather than its content (3, 5). Because the desperate owner and the threat of police lead her to hand it back, Sasha holds on to it only shortly, but in these minutes, she "float[s]" on excitement. She cannot stop "touching the fat green wallet just for a second, for the contraction it made her feel around her heart" and later hugs "her purse to her shoulder, the warm ball of wallet snuggled in her armpit" (5, 6, 9). For her, the wallet is "tender and overripe as a peach" (5), its theft creates a shared

experience with the wallet's owner. Though obviously myopic, this perspective helps Sasha to rationalize her compulsion. Since she and her victim "had never seen each other," Sasha fantasizes freely about her (5). But once she realizes that "the person before her had nothing in common with the blithe, raven-haired wallet owner she'd picture" (9), regret promptly replaces Sasha's superficial thrill. The two women eventually share an ambivalent moment, again at the bar's most intimate space, the restroom. Sasha confesses to her "problem" because she is terrified by a "cascade of horrors: arrest, shame, poverty, death" (10, 11). As she hands the wallet back and begs for secrecy, she suddenly finds herself at the mercy of her earlier victim. Yet at the same time, the woman's "physical relief at having it back coursed through Sasha in a warm rush, as if their bodies had fused" (11). Eager "to get away[,]" the woman assures Sasha that the incident is "between us" (12). As a result, she inadvertently rewards Sasha's intrusion with a fleeting actualization of her unarticulated desire: a moment of reciprocal vulnerability, empathy and forgiveness.

After this intimate moment, Sasha is again "tired of Alex." The "mere twenty minutes" of thrill had "blown [them] past the desired point of meaningful-connection-through-shared-experience into the less appealing state of knowing-each-other-too-well" (12). Sasha still brings Alex to her apartment, where he notices her stolen junk. In another ambivalent mix of excitement and panic, Sasha distracts him from the seemingly random assortment by rushing him into sex. Afterwards, she is deflated yet again: "All her excitement had seeped away, leaving behind a terrible sadness, an emptiness that felt violent, as if she'd been gouged" (16). The cycle of desire and disappointment is restarted as the insufficiency of their physical encounter drives her to lift a scrap paper from Alex's wallet that states "I BELIEVE IN YOU" (18). While the scrap itself is worthless and even lacks pertinent hapticity, it meets Sasha's longing through language. The statement's sincere confidence, troubled only by the fact that she broke Alex's trust to indulge in it, excites her. The words "seemed to tunnel toward her from their meager scrap bringing a flush of embarrassment for Alex, who'd kept this disintegrating tribute in his disintegrating wallet, and then shame at herself for having looked at it" (18). The mundane note affects what their nonchalant encounter does not provide: a glimpse of the other's fears and desires, a sense of familiarity, an inkling of intimacy. Ironically, Sasha's desire to create such moments causes her to violate the mutual trust required to establish them in the first place. Through troubled characters like Sasha, *Goon Squad* indicates that intimacy is too volatile to be sustained in casual connections. Although

it can come in fleeting instances, the trust and reciprocity that Sasha is actually after thrives on longevity rather than ephemerality.

However, as Alex confirms upon arrival in Sasha's "old New York" apartment, material artefacts do enable intimate connections. He is immediately fascinated by the historical allure of the tenement building and takes a special liking to Sasha's free-standing bathtub (14). Aware of his shift in attention, Sasha speculates that she will be reduced to a "glint in the hazy memory that Alex would struggle to organize in a year or two from now. *Where was that place with the bathtub? Who was that girl?*" (14, original emphasis). Her suspicion is confirmed when Alex later resurfaces as Bennie's associate and recalls "something about a wallet," and only later "that lost girl he'd dated once" (324). Though he remembers having heard Bennie's name first from this "lost girl," the "answers" to his questions about her remain "maddeningly absent" until "without warning, Alex abruptly recalled [Sasha's] name," only to then wonder what had happened between them (318; 333). He remains unable to recall her: "she seemed to wink at him (green eyes?) and slip away" (333). At its end, *Goon Squad* links back to its first chapter: Bennie leads Alex to Sasha's old building, where the latter is seized by his memories in the form of "a hot-cold flash of recognition, a shiver of déjà vu" (347). As Sasha speculated, he remembers "those ill-lit angular stairs […] as clearly as if he'd left Sasha's apartment just this morning" and her "bathtub in the kitchen—yes, she'd had one of those! It was the only one he'd ever seen"—but not Sasha herself (347). When Bennie tells him about her kleptomania, he is unable to link it to the night's missing wallet: "A connection was trying to form in Alex's mind, but he couldn't complete it" (346). In his memory, Sasha is a mere link to her distinct bathtub.

Does Sasha and Alex's materially mediated relationship illustrate non-human agency (Marchand)? Scholars of new materialism might make this case, but the apparent equality of Sasha, Alex, and the bathtub as interconnected nodes does not imply equivalence. Rather than negating the subject-object divide, their constellation illustrates the de-humanizing potential of networks, especially when understood as social forms. Networks necessarily reduce anyone or anything to their respective connective properties and, as a result, cancel out such imprecise yet important dichotomies of human encounters like surface and depth, inward and outward. Network Culture's mandate to manage contingent relations and to perpetually search for new ones (subject of chapter 4.4.1) reduces Sasha and Alex to nodes without regard for their interiority. This reifying process

enables the fetishistic focus on their respective items of choice, for only within the network logic do they encounter bathtubs or screwdrivers at eye level. Sasha and Alex's fascination with objects exceeds their fascination for each other and prevents an understanding of how their desire relates to larger networks.

Despite Sasha's favoring of objects by "people" rather than "stores," this displacement evokes Marx's commodity fetish: Instead of investigating how their desires are produced beyond their control, Sasha and Alex remain enthralled by the "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" of their chosen objects (Marx 61). True to its stylistic polyphony, *Goon Squad* complicates such commodity worship. Even in severe financial trouble, the has-been rockstar Bosco "refuse[s] to sell" "his collection of pre-Columbian artifacts, which he hoarded in pristine glass" (133–34) and in one of *Goon Squad*'s few optimistic developments, Sasha eventually manages to channel her kleptomania into "art." As her daughter reports somewhat skeptically in a later chapter, Sasha creates collages of "casual and meaningless" but somehow "precious" household objects (273). Given *Goon Squad*'s countless intertextual allusions from ancient Greek myths to (post)modernist motives and recent cinema and television, this transformation from thief to artist also works as an authorial comment on artistic (un)originality (Cowart 251–52; Strong 473). However, the correspondence between Sasha and Alex's failure to grasp the "network sublime" (to be discussed in chapter 4.3.1) and the sphere of capitalistic circulation illustrates *Goon Squad*'s mediation of the interrelations between emotional and economic conditions.

Though Sasha and Alex's relationship is dominated by haptic objects, it is initiated on a dating website, and *Goon Squad* in fact contains numerous digital networkers: After carelessly provoking a lion which is subsequently shot during the chapter's titular "Safari,"

> [t]he members of Ramsey's safari have gained a story they'll tell for the rest of their lives. It will prompt some of them, years from now, to search for each other on Google and Facebook, unable to resist the wish-fulfillment fantasy these portals offer: *What ever happened to…?* (74, original emphasis)

The narrative's skepticism toward the promises of online networking becomes apparent in the follow-up of these attempts. After describing how two of the group's members actually begin a new life together, it asserts that "this outcome will be the stark exception—mostly, the reunions will lead to a mutual discovery that having been on safari thirty-five years before doesn't qualify as having much in common" (75). Against the self-explanatory appeal of this truism, the tourists

are not alone in their frustrating efforts to establish meaningful relations on their own. These attempts are made necessary by the decline of historically reliable bonds in which intimacy, however ambivalent, was often a given. *Goon Squad*'s countless absent parents, dysfunctional marriages, divorces and alienated friendships show the instability of traditional kinship networks. Instead, the text exemplifies the shift from traditional bonds such as in the nuclear family to reflexive relationships (see section 2.3): Sasha's youth first with a violent, then with an absent father (225–26) mirrors those of Bennie's teenage bandmates Rhea and Scotty, who each mourn the loss of a parent (89, 99). Like Bennie's mentor Lou, who has six children with three different wives, Scotty gets divorced twice. Bennie himself turns into a serial adulterer, is left by his wife and eventually remarries.

The characters' efforts to curate their intimate relations as free-floating agents have mixed results. Lacking permanence, familiarity and dependability, a network's casual and transient connections are a steady source of disappointment. Alex's complaint is representative here: "you have no fucking idea what people are really like. They're not even two-faced—they're, like, multiple personalities" (13). Expanding their search for profound relationships beyond the frustrations of the present moment, many follow the safari tourists' nostalgic impetus and turn to the past. Others expect better times in the future. But these temporal escapes produce problems of their own. As *Goon Squad* demystifies both nostalgia's rose-colored glasses as well as naïve hopes for better days to come, the wish for intimacy in a different time falls short.

4.3. Ambivalent Times

Goon Squad is, as Ivan Kreilkamp notes with reference to Paul Ricœur, not only a "tale *of* time[,]" but also a "tale *about* time" in which "the very experience of time that is at stake" (Ricœur qtd. in Kreilkamp 17, original emphasis). Due to its relentless progress, time embodies the book's titular "goon." In a moment of crisis, Sasha painfully feels the minutes pass: "another, then another, then one more" (19). Eventually "pushing sixty" at *Goon Squad*'s end, Bennie comes to be "seen as irrelevant" and usually "referred to in the past tense" (319). Upon visiting her terminally ill ex-lover who once believed to "never get old" (58), the character Jocelyn wonders about time's violent potential: "How did you get so old? […] Did you know this was coming […] or did it ambush you from behind?" Jocelyn herself "lost time" during her "desultory twenties" (80, 90). PR expert Dolly reaches her professional nadir after she "had conceived of an event crystallizing an era that had

already passed […] there could be no greater failure" (151). And after his release from prison, someone else quips: "I go away for a few years and the whole fucking world is upside down" (130). Virtually everyone struggles with time's progress and, barring a few important exceptions to be discussed, "the goon [has] won" by the end (341).

Levine maintains that network theory enhances narrative theory, but that for considerations of time, the reverse holds true as well. Narrative form can make tangible the temporal unfolding of networks (122), an insight that contributes to a more dynamic understanding of networks and the potentially conflicting temporalities within them:

> In any network, nodes can be replaced, and they can gather links to new nodes. To capture a moment, one must struggle to grasp the multiple systems of interconnection—constantly unfolding and expanding and overlapping—that constitute local instantiations of the social. Since these different systems emerge, expand, and develop in different times and places and at different rates, any apprehension of a cultural network must be responsive not only to multiple networks but also to their multiple temporalities (130).

In other words, any analysis must stay conscious of the difficulty to synthesize time and space even momentarily from the complex and perpetually changing relations of a network. The two subsequent sections illustrate how Egan's characters struggle with this complex task.

4.3.1. (In)voluntary Pasts

Goon Squad has a complicated relationship to nostalgia. One the one hand, as the following will explore in more detail, it expresses a yearning for the supposedly unmediated and somewhat more innocent human relations of the analog era. On the other, its portrayal of naïve attempts to act on such nostalgia suggests an insight similar to Levine's. Many characters briefly transcend the irreversible course of time with the help of music, but the text adamantly maintains the singularity of such epiphanies. The rehearsal of Bennie's teenage punk band is representative:

> the second Scotty lets the garage door slam down, we're suddenly enraged, all of us. Bennie's bass snickers to life, and pretty soon we're screaming out the songs, which have titles like 'Pet Rock,' and 'Do the Math,' and 'Pass Me the Kool-Aid,' but when we holler them aloud in Scotty's garage the lyrics might as well be: *fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck* […] every time Scotty ropes up the door we glare out at the bright day shaking its head at us (46).

The scene evokes a state of exception reminiscent of Foucault's theorization of heterotopias, spaces autonomous of their environment and the dominant sense of time (Buchanan). Temporarily shutting out both nature's and society's structuring principles—the sunlight shining on their middle class neighborhood—the band escapes into the anarchy of what Martin Moling calls "punk time:"

"Since the precision of clock time is inextricably bound to the rational faculties, rock music's violent abandonment of the law and order facilitates the evasion of the passage of time" (53, 55–56). Melissa Strong similarly argues that Egan's text utilizes the ancient Greek opposition between "chronos," linear time, and "kairos," an opportune moment presenting "the possibility of the eternal […] interrupting the limitations of the present moment" (472). In turn, both her and Moling's terminology share an utopian impulse with Walter Benjamin's "Jetztzeit" (Buchanan, "jetztzeit"). The following chapters show, however, that *Goon Squad*'s lateral network form forecloses the unexpected, even revolutionary glitch that the modernists sought out.

But this freedom is by definition momentary. As Nik Cohn asserts, rock music's potent ability to "trap the instant" has an obvious downside in its ephemerality: "By its very nature, which is explosion, it is unequipped for abstractions, for profundity or permanence" (qtd. in Moling 56). As a result, the authentic ecstasy that (might have) reigned at the time cannot be recreated; all restaging attempts must fall short. Bennie's struggle to come to terms with this uncomfortable truth serves as a poignant warning. Similarly to how he seeks to rejuvenate himself through the bizarre "gold cure" mentioned above, he desperately chases the supposed blessings of his youth, particularly "the rapturous surges of sixteen-year-old-ness" his favorite songs induce in him (24). But unlike the gold he consumes, Bennie does not outlast time untarnished. Predictably, the idealization of a past (with a bright future full of possibilities) only creates problems for him in the present. Jennifer Smith's assessment that "Bennie constructs a vision of the past conditioned by his disappointments in the present" indicates his failure to account for the different entanglements of his past and present (142).

Although it is a 17th century medical neologism (Starobinski 84), "nostalgia" has Greek roots—"nostos," meaning "return home," and "algia" for "longing"—and, according to Svetlana Boym, signifies "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed," which is why nostalgia is a yearning for a past time more than a lost place (xiii, xv). Barbara Cassin concurs:

> nostalgia is not simply homesickness and the return home. This feeling, at once overwhelming and gentle, is, like every origin, a chosen fiction that constantly gives clues so as to be taken for what it is, an adorable, human fiction, a cultural fact. Would the best way to be back home in one's homeland not then be […] to be in a home that is not one's own (2–3)?

As the following discussion of Bennie's haunting past shows, it is this sense of not belonging, of being at someone else's home that fuels his "restorative nostalgia" which "stresses *nostos* and

attempts a transhistorical reconstruction of the lost home" (Boym xviii, original emphasis). Nostalgia might be constitutive for Bennie's identity, but his efforts to recapture an idealized past fail, nevertheless.

Bennie should know better than to romanticize the past, anyway. "Nostalgia was the end—everyone knew that" in his line of work (39). In the lates 1970s, the hippies were "getting old" and he and his friends, bright futures ahead of them, were "sick of them" (42–43). But in the present, the past itself is the power preventing Bennie from nostalgically telling it like it wasn't. Befitting the two epigraphs of Marcel Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* which preface *Goon Squad*, the past is as an autonomous agent that can force Bennie into "a loop from twenty years ago" and even paralyze him, leaving him no choice but to wait "for the memory spasm to pass" (22, 25). Bennie is a frequent victim of Proustian *mémoire involontaire*, "those piercing lances of memory which punctuate our experience as unbidden visceral flashbacks, particularly associated with unconscious sensory recollection" (Edwards 20). In a single afternoon, he is overcome by a cascade of five escalating memories. While he listens to a rehearsal in a dingy basement, Bennie is first taken back to his own musical beginnings. Having already "experienced a bump of anticipation" beforehand, the music elates him:

> Oh, the raw, almost-threadbare sound of their voices mixed with the clash of instruments—these sensations met with a faculty deeper in Bennie than judgment or even pleasure; they communed directly with his body, whose shivering, bursting reply made him dizzy. […] He felt the music in his mouth, his ears, his ribs—or was that his own pulse? He was on fire! (31)

But in contrast to the rehearsals of his teenage band, this ecstasy is not only ephemeral, but unsustainable from the very moment it emerges. The "shame memories began early that day for Bennie" when he unwillingly remembered a regrettable youth prank and an embarrassing slip of the tongue (20). The third such unpleasant recollection hits him at the "zenith of lusty, devouring joy" quoted above when he abruptly recalls two colleagues calling him "hairball" (32). Trying to distract himself by thinking of his child, Bennie recollects the embarrassment of his son having lice. Once more, he attempts to free himself by focusing on Sasha, whose physical proximity had caused "his first erection in months" mere moments before (31). But instead of comfort, her smell brings about yet another humiliating memory of failing to impress "some delicious blond" years ago (33).

These seemingly banal recollections combine into an existential dread, inducing "waves of shame so immense they seemed to engulf whole parts of Bennie's life and drag them away: achievements, successes, moments of pride, all of it razed to the point where there was nothing—he was nothing" (33). Although he is far from the only character afflicted by *mémoire involontaire*, Bennie's episodes are particularly intense; they can "hurt him physically, as if the memory were raking over him and leaving gashes" (33). The somatic force illustrates the ambivalence of Bennie's sensory memories: Much like the music had "communed directly" with his body, he feels the dreadful flashbacks in "his mouth, his ears, his ribs." While Bennie gets to relive his past, it is not the romanticized episodes he treasures but the painfully authentic "shame memories."

The underlying disconnections of Bennie's life reveal a pattern in his ostensibly random memories and help explain his inability to cope with them. In his youth, his origin from a working-class Chicano household is so unremarkable that even his bandmate and admirer Rhea is stunned to learn that "Bennie's a cholo" (44). In the predominantly white corporate environment and upper-class circles he later frequents, however, he remains a self-conscious outsider. His slip of the tongue at a gala event where he calls a musician "incompetent" instead of "incomparable" poignantly exemplifies his class anxiety. He retrospectively scolds himself because "incomparable" "wasn't his word, too fancy […] But it suited the pianist, who had miles of shiny gold hair and had also (she'd let slip) graduated from Harvard" (24). Trying to accommodate the angelic musician and the distinguished environment through an elevated register, Bennie inadvertently exposes himself as a supposed fraud. Whereas the Freudian slip reveals his unarticulated conviction of being incompetent himself, his "rash dream of getting [the pianist] into bed" alleviates this anxiety (24).

The "hairball" memory in turn exemplifies his unease about the racialized perception of him. Upon learning about his moniker "a feeling of liquid shame" overcomes Bennie. "He hadn't been sure what it meant: That he was hairy? (True.) Unclean? (False!)," but the racist projection of supposedly unhygienic hair of racialized subjects is evocated clearly enough for him to get "a haircut that very day" (32). Similar associations underlie the memory of his son Chris having lice. In response to his barber's suspicion that "[t]hey get it at school," Bennie blurts: "But he goes to private school! […] In Crandale, New York!" (33). In his mind, the affluent neighborhood simply cannot be the origin of the parasites, so he instead blames "his own riotous head of hair, to the point where he sprayed [the pesticide] OFF! in his armpits every morning to this day" (33). Crandale

"wasn't a place that warmed easily to strangers" and epitomizes the kind of network that remains unavailable to him (117). At the local country club, "the farthest distance Bennie had traveled from [his] dark-eyed grandmother in Daly City" (119), he receives "odd looks by the pool" and is mockingly referred to as an Al-Qaeda operative at a "hedge-fund-fueled cocktail party" (122–23). Amidst the war on terror, he remains suspect to the white elite. "One recognizes" home in the spatial and temporal sense outlined above, Cassin writes, "because one is recognized there, that is, because one has one's identity there" (17). Clearly, Bennie's "return home" (nostos) is neither possible in the past nor in the present. Although the causes for his experience of not-belonging are obviously beyond him, they nevertheless shape the "local instantiations" of his daily reality (Levine 130) and perpetuate Bennie's troubled relationship to his past.

However misguided, Bennie is trying. His therapist told him "to write down the things he wanted to confide" and he jots down key words "in hopes of exorcising the memor[ies]" (25, 32). Immediately following the misunderstanding on their drive back into the city discussed above (see section 4.1), Sasha notices the list:

> Bennie handed it to her, his reluctance to have the list seen by human eyes overwhelming him a half-second late. To his horror, she began reading it aloud:
> 'Kissing Mother Superior [youth prank], incompetent, hairball, poppy seeds [lice], on the can [failed flirt].'
> Bennie listened in agony, as if the words themselves might provoke a catastrophe. But they were neutralized the instant Sasha spoke them in her scratchy voice.
> 'Not bad,' she said. 'They're titles, right?'
>
> 'Sure,' Bennie said. 'Can you read them one more time?' She did, and now they sounded like titles to him, too. He felt peaceful, cleansed (39).

Bennie again all too happily follows Sasha's inadvertent digression away from an opportunity of confessional intimacy. Given his aversion to their label's music, commodifying his memories as track titles repeats his career's betrayal of genuine art. His "peaceful, cleansed" feeling results from a willful self-deception that avoids the agonizing process of coming to terms with the past. Both characters desire intimate exchanges with *someone*, but Bennie's inability and Sasha's reluctance preclude intimate moments. Following Bennie's brief episode of sexual euphoria mentioned above, his fascination with Sasha becomes platonic again: "Bennie felt no lust at all […] What he felt for Sasha was love, a safety and closeness" (40). But unlike the narrative voice describing his affective state, Bennie is incapable of expressing himself and instead reverts to well-worn clichés: "I'm crazy for you, Sasha, […] Crazy." Though she effortlessly dismisses him, Sasha nevertheless meets his

emotional need by highlighting their mutual dependence—"There's no way, Bennie, […] We need each other"—and giving him "a chaste kiss, a kiss between brother and sister, mother and son" (40). Though he feels "a swell of gratitude and appreciation" and actually "toy[s] with the idea" of "confessing to her his disillusionment," he does not manage the required leap of faith (29, 38). Bennie feels strongly about Sasha, but his admiration remains functional and flat: Sasha shuttles between sexual stimulant and motherly caretaker, but never emerges as an independent human with desires and problems of her own. Tormented by biases of class and race himself, Bennie subjects Sasha to sexist reductions. As a result, an exchange between two intimates never materializes. Sasha, in turn, is well aware of their lacking reciprocity. Therapeutic attention is constitutive for her position and emotional support for the self-pitying Bennie is as much part of her job as an assistant as are coffee runs. Evidently, the intimacy their unequal relationship could produce would likely be unsolicited.

Levine insists that the friction within cultural networks requires any analysis to be aware not only of various competing networks but also of their "multiple temporalities" (130). Given this high bar, it is not surprising that Bennie remains unable to recognize and adequately address the convolutions between his personal life on the one side, and long-term and large-scale social dynamics on the other. Merely sensing the scale of his problems, he demonstrates that the immense complexities and abstractions of (social) networks "are accessible only at the edge of our sensibilities." The "network sublime" (Jagoda 3, 21) emerging from countless (unrecognized) ties between personal conundrums and larger social structures in various degrees of abstraction simply overwhelm Bennie. Notably, he is not the only one in helpless awe of network sublimity. *Goon Squad* portrays numerous characters' dubious or outright foolish attempts to free themselves from their entanglements. Unlike his ill-advised but apparently inconsequential self-medication with gold and pesticides, Bennie's compulsive attraction to upper-class "blondes" leads to serial infidelities and failed relationships (121). Alongside Sasha's kleptomania and Bennie's adultery, *Goon Squad* chronicles additional follies and immoralities, including the planning of a literal "Suicide Tour" of an aging musician (136), a journalist who sexually assaults a celebrity during an interview (175–90), a PR agent's effort to restore the public image of a genocidal dictator (145–74) and an intoxicated night swim in New York's East river that ends fatally (191–214). These "stupid solutions" (Newfield, "What" 22) for a complexly networked world enjoy little to no success and virtually no one manages to overcome their disorientation. Chapter 4.5. will address

whether this assessment changes for *Goon Squad* as a whole, that is to say whether the text effects knowledge about the globe-spanning networks it explores.

4.3.2. Preemptive Futurity

In a twist on Proust's *mémoire involontaire*, Egan regularly employs what Gérard Genette calls analeptic prolepses, or flashforwards to flashbacks (Genette, *Erzählung* 39–47). In these instances, such as Sasha's pondering if and how Alex will remember her (see section 4.2), the "present is experienced as the object of a future memory, or in anticipation of retrospection" (Currie 40). The omniscient narrative voice here prevents the potential (future) idealization of the very moment that is narrated by arresting its progress and pointing to looming disasters. "Safari" contains several examples of this effect that Caroline Edwards suggests to call *l'avenir involontaire*, or "involuntary futurity" (21). An insightful scene, once again driven by music, depicts young Rolph dancing with his older sister Charlie. Perhaps because "they were allowed to have wine at dinner" (83), he overcomes his embarrassment:

> As they move together, Rolph feels his self-consciousness miraculously fade, as if he is growing up right there on the dance floor, becoming a boy who dances with girls like his sister. Charlie feels it, too. In fact, this particular memory is one she'll return to again and again, for the rest of her life, long after Rolph has shot himself in the head in their father's house at twenty-eight: her brother as a boy, hair slicked flat, eyes sparkling, shyly learning to dance (87).

The incursion of Rolph's suicide prevents any sentimentality in an otherwise entirely innocent passage. The disturbed coming-of-age scene confirms Gloria Fisk's suggestion that prolepses in recent fiction revolve around catastrophes (Robbins, "Many" 196–97)—though, in *Goon Squad*, they are personal in scale. Mindy, who accompanies Rolph and Charlie as their father Lou's girlfriend, offers another example. As she dances with him, the reader is offered a glimpse of her future: "[A]fter marrying Lou and having two daughters, his fifth and sixth children, in quick succession, as if sprinting against the inevitable drift of his attention," she will also "think longingly of this trip to Africa as the last happy moment of her life" (86). An earlier instance of this effect is enabled by technology when Mindy first uses a Walkman: "the experience of music pouring directly against her eardrums—hers alone—is a shock that makes her eyes well up; the privacy of it, the way it transforms her surroundings into a golden montage, as if she were looking back on this lark in Africa with Lou from some distant future" (68).

Leaping from present to future and back, both *Goon Squad*'s narrative and its overall structure mirror the non-linear trajectories of its characters. The text's "little or no linear development" echoes "the random growth of the network" in which "stories and events instead form complex web-like structures" (Everett qtd. in Edwards 16). "Safari" illustrates another instance in which an inanimate object can be at a network's center. The reader learns that a hunting dagger hanging on the hip of a "warrior" dancing with Charlie will, "[t]hirty-five years from now" be inherited by his grandson Joe, who will take it to the United States where he eventually becomes "an expert in visual robotic technology that detects the slightest hint of irregular movement (the legacy of a childhood spent scanning the grass for lions)." A specialist "for crowd security," Joe will display "his grandfather's hunting dagger […] inside a cube of Plexiglas, directly under a skylight" of his New York apartment (64–65). Bruce Robbins, who praises these prolepses for "maintaining an aesthetically successful and morally valuable uncertainty as to whose story this really is" (201), 'only' considers father Lou, girlfriend Mindy, children Charlie and Rolph, as well as Joe to be contenders. But the dagger with its trans-Atlantic networks has an equal claim.

Evidently, the network is a useful metaphor for the sprawling connections among *Goon Squad*'s characters, settings, artifacts and times. But to fully understand the relationship between text and concept, the form should be looked at through the prism of its own historical context.

4.4. Networked Labor

Spanning from the early 1970s to the near future, *Goon Squad* covers large parts of a period "characterized by an unprecedented *abundance* of informational output and by an *acceleration* of informational dynamics," that is to say the rise of "*network culture*" (Terranova 1, original emphases). It is therefore a curious oversight that scholars interested in the competing temporalities of network narratives frequently neglect to consider what literary networks might say about their own place in history beyond evident parallels to (digital) infrastructure (Edwards 14, Levine 127–30). The reliance on design theory explains this blind spot in Levine's case, since her focus on ostensibly timeless "affordances" ignores each form's specific context and thus risks ahistoricity. Dorson observes that Levine tacitly prioritizes a stable definition of forms and their uses over their interaction in the world. In contrast to her stated aim of reconciling formalism and historicism, he notes, Levine advocates to "first be formalist, and then historicist—instead of both at once" (29).

4.4.1. Aesthetics of Connexionism

In an essay on "Network Aesthetics," Ngai observes that the quantitative increase of network discourses gradually led to a qualitative change of the notion itself and argues that the network has evolved from a descriptive to a normative notion: "What is specific to our contemporary moment," she argues, "is the rise of 'connexionism' as an ideological worldview and thus as a basis for making evaluative judgments ranging from the ethical to the aesthetic" ("Network" 368). Ngai takes the term from Boltanski and Chiapello, who use it to highlight the costs of more 'humane' and sensitive forms of work relations in what they dub "a connexionist world" (131). To briefly repeat their argument, they assert that *The New Spirit of Capitalism* has gained legitimacy by harnessing the countercultural "artistic critique" aimed at stiff hierarchies and centralized authority (xiii). Unlike earlier capitalist formations that respectively valued "rational asceticism" and "responsibility and knowledge," a premium is now put on "*activity*:" "To be doing something, to move, to change—this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often regarded as synonymous with inaction" (155, original emphasis). The postindustrial "network morality" diffuses hierarchical structures and rewards individual and autonomous action (463) and, as Liu observes, it repositions "leisure *within* work" (*Laws* 163, original emphasis). The establishment of connections within evolving networks comes to be the central (and never-ending) "activity." In brief, one ought to "put an end to isolation," create "opportunities for meeting people" and perpetually develop new projects (Boltanski and Chiapello 110). The resulting frenzy is one of the network effects on individuals who have internalized that—much like a network that needs to spread in order ensure its own existence—their legitimacy derives from their activity.

Urs Stäheli's *Sociology of Disconnection* (*Soziologie der Entnetzung*) puts forth a similar perspective: Networks, Stäheli states, are not a neutral technology that can be dealt with in mere descriptive terms. On the contrary, they encourage an "ethos of connectivity" whose mandate to establish ever new connections is as an end in itself—and inherently excessive (25).[21] The result is the very flurry of actions mentioned above. One of the more disconcerting side effect of the imperative to "always connect!" is the tacit warning to remain within certain norms so as to stay compatible with one's surrounding networks (25, 33–34); an effect with obvious homogenizing effects. In this context, Levine's sober assessment that "[i]n any network, nodes can be replaced"

[21] This and all subsequent quotations by Stäheli translated by FE.

takes on a threatening connotation (130). Given the unending task of networking and the inherent threat of replacing any unproductive node, Ngai's observation of "a general intensification of labor" in network aesthetics becomes plausible ("Network" 381).

These aspects are brought to a head in *Goon Squad*'s last chapter specifically. "Pure Language" introduces a near future tormented by climate change and years of militarization through the resurfaced Alex, Sasha's date at the book's opening. His node replaces hers as Sasha has left New York by *Goon Squad*'s end and Alex works as Bennie's assistant in her stead. After begrudgingly agreeing to a scheme of surreptitious advertising, Alex uses his online contacts as "parrots to create 'authentic' word of mouth" for a concert by Scotty, Bennie's old bandmate (322). To find suitable candidates, Alex skims the "15,896 friends" of his online network along the categories of financial "Need," "Reach" and "Corruptibility." The somewhat scrupulous Alex is contrasted with his young associate Lulu, "a graduate student at Barnard *and* Bennie's full-time assistant: a living embodiment of the new 'handset employee:' paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent" (325, original emphasis). Lulu is proficient in marketing jargon, skeptical of personal convictions and other "calcified moralities" and accustomed to the all-powerful mobile devices Egan terms "T." Her "theoretical omnipresence" collapses any remaining distinctions between work and home, labor and leisure and enables her to effortlessly accommodate connexionism's mandates of individualized and digitized work. A life-long learner and autonomous associate, Lulu is the prototypical net*worker.* Her android-like perfection does not surprise the attentive reader, for earlier chapters introduced an eerily mature preteen Lulu and her mother, the "digitally enhanced" "La Doll" (140). When La Doll struggles professionally, Lulu is "adamant about not allowing her […] to jeopardize Lulu's status with her new disgrace" (155). Adored by her friends and always at the center of a "coterie of girls who seemed to follow her everywhere," young Lulu's "authority" is already described in the language of (corporate) leadership: "she was stern when she needed to be, but also soft. Kind. Lulu was nine" (154, 174).

The chapter's discussion of language teases out network culture's expanding grip. An avid "T" user, Lulu "get[s] tired of talking" and favors messaging over conversations even in personal meetings: In her view, the former is "pure—no philosophy, no metaphors, no judgments." In the digital shorthand reminiscent of baby talk, she confesses to Alex, who sits across from her, about not knowing her father, "Nvr met my dad. Dyd b4 I ws brn." Alex first responds vocally, then

realizes that "his voice seemed too loud—a coarse intrusion" into the digital intimacy and corrects himself by simply messaging "Sad" (329–30). Befitting *Goon Squad*'s portrayal of an escalating obsession with youthfulness, the divide between analog and digital runs along generations. Alex's mind is gradually colonized by the simplified language of "brain-T," but his awareness of this very process signals a remaining unease with the digital omnipotence. Though Lulu uses her devices instinctively and for any purpose (338), even she is outperformed by the numerous babies populating the chapter. Thanks to Egan's satirical exaggeration, "any child who could point was able to download music—the youngest buyer on record being a three-month-old" so that "these babies […] become the arbiters of musical success" and revive the entire industry (320).

The text pairs societal and linguistic deterioration through Alex's wife Rebecca, an academic who studies "word casings," or "words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks […] 'friend' and 'real' and 'story' and 'change'—words that had been shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks" (331). In addition to the obvious allusion to postmodernism's potentially exasperating interest in free-floating signifiers, "shucked" and "husks" here recalls Bennie's grievances about the digitally produced "husks of music." Digitization not only obliterates the "muddiness" of real music, but it also strips language of its indispensable ambiguities and slippages. The implied dichotomy of superficial "husks" and (missing) substance indicates that the network form tends to empty out whatever content it transmits and thus compels a surface reading (see section 2.4.3) that truly knows no depth. This dialectic property is best discussed with reference to the text's climactic finale in the form of Scotty's concert, an artistic display which momentarily seems to reverse this hollowing-out process. Before turning to this event, however, a discussion of Egan's strategies of reader-involvement helps to contextualize this apparent epiphany.

4.4.2. The Reader's Network

Goon Squad's interest in labor can be teased out via its relationship to the reader. Beyond the hermeneutical effort inherent in all acts of reading, the book invites the reader to individually (re)construct its fragmented times and spaces. Wolfgang Funk claims that Egan performatively "forfeits her authority to structure the representation" of *Goon Squad* and turns over to the readers the ability—and responsibility—"to reconstruct the story and the plotting themselves from the sheer textual material" (170). Echoing Levine, he states that Egan's "attempt at formalized formlessness" inverts the usual constellation between storyline and plot (170, 172). In its apparent

indifference to coherence, *Goon Squad* compels the "readers to retrace the process of plotting in the very act of reading itself" while exploring the stories' manifold interconnections (172). By mandating intellectual work beyond the usual eye movement and turning of pages (Aarseth 1–2), Egan "emphasizes the need for a significant and signifying other, the reader" for the establishment of order within the text (Funk 172). The readers' sense-making abilities are central to what the text *becomes* in the reading process, their "curatorial labor" helps *Goon Squad* to transcend from letters on the page to personal experience (Jordan 17).

Goon Squad's loose ends individualize the reading experience to a degree that allows links to a host of occasionally competing forms and genres. The formal flexibility and inherent interpretive tradeoffs explain the numerous and often conflicting attempts at categorization. The respective focus of each reader necessarily pushes other perspectives or entire narrative strands into the background or prevents them from being told in the first place (Butchard 361). Egan's reluctance to categorize her work corroborates this indeterminacy, "I had no idea what *Goon Squad* was until I started talking to readers […] and they filled me in" (in Strong 473). By tracking the perpetually changing constellations of characters, times and places, the reader embodies one of the book's "hubs." Such openness relies on "a minimum of cooperation, a leap of imaginary faith" (Funk 172), invokes a "sense of 'presence' and 'sameness'" (Timmer 13) and Kelly's New Sincerity. Compared to the challenging tasks Wallace designed for his readers, apparently with one 'correct solution' in mind (see section 3.4), Egan's text actually accommodates its various readers.

Befitting this convivial approach, the work *Goon Squad* demands from the reader is *playful*. Some scholars emphasize the elements of doubt and ambiguity faced by the readership when undertaking the interpretive journey (Funk 172), but the process resembles experiential adventure more than existential agony, the reader journeys through "an enjoyable labyrinth" (Gioia). Since every story contains recognizable markers regarding its time and place, the network's growth is largely transparent. In Wolfgang Iser's terms, the text offers many, but rather small "gaps of indeterminacy" to fill (39). Sasha and Bennie are introduced in the first two chapters and then referenced in virtually all subsequent parts. In addition, while the network narrative may seem to grow randomly, center and periphery always connect, so that its inner logic remains comprehensible. The combination of ergodic and playful elements as well as Egan's reliance on narrative multiperspectivism encourages her readers to join in. When, for example, Sasha hands

Bennie his box of gold flakes saying "you dropped it coming out of the recording room" and he kindheartedly reflects that "[s]he was doing that more and more, finding things he'd misplaced—sometimes before Bennie even knew they were missing" (36), the alert reader recognizes Sasha's kleptomania hundreds of pages and years of narrated time before Bennie himself becomes aware of her "sticky fingers" (346). The same applies to Sasha and Bennie's missed opportunities for intimacy (see sections 4.1 and 4.3.1) which, in order to mobilize intimacy effects on a higher level, appeal to the reader's recognition of the very potential for emotional communion which both characters miss. This way, *Goon Squad* frequently makes the reader the missing link between two not-yet connected nodes.

The book's much-discussed slide-show chapter illustrates another strategy of reader-involvement. In her visual diary, Sasha's daughter Alison relates two days of her family life as well as her brother Lincoln's idiosyncratic obsession with "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" (242–316). Each slide occupies an entire page in landscape format. Alison's story is a predictable melodrama and sentimental in tone, but the various tables, shapes, and Venn diagrams prevent a conventional reading from top left to bottom right. Instead, the reader must turn the book on its side and meander across each page in search for narrative. Like Wallace's *The Pale King* (see section 3.4), *Goon Squad*'s foregrounding of its own tactility and layout as a printed book evokes "metamediality," an aesthetic strategy that Starre understands to be a conscious response to the ever-increasing importance of digital (hyper)texts (8). *Goon Squad*'s obsession with what is lost in the transition from analog to digital (music), its journalistic chapter set in newspaper design (175–90) and the reference to vinyl records that divides the book into "A" and "B" sides corroborate this perspective. One of the few labels Egan offers for her text, the concept album ("Reader's"), is therefore an apt description.

By calling attention to the hapticity of its printed edition, *Goon Squad* performatively conveys to the readers that the object they are holding in their hands is an artefact linking to the multiple networks which it itself describes. Like Sasha's stolen items, her bathtub for Alex or Joe's dagger, the printed book *Goon Squad* carries (the potential for) an intimate aura. The material page grounds the various ties that its readers curate, so that *Goon Squad* similarly bespeaks Jessica Pressman's "aesthetic of bookishness," a markedly intensified preoccupation with the material book during the reign of digital media. *Goon Squad*'s formal nostalgia for analog media evokes

this effect, understood as a "fetishism" in the Freudian sense that mourns the supposed obsolescence of the printed book (159). In Boym's typology, Egan's book performs a "reflective nostalgia" which, unlike Bennie's restorative version attempting a return to the lost home, "thrives in *algia*, the longing itself," "dwells on the ambivalence of human longing and belonging" and, at best, "can present an ethical and creative challenge" (Boym xviii, original emphasis). Here, nostalgia serves as the basis for reflection and critique and, as Stäheli observes, the wistful mode is no coincidence, for the desire to evade the mandate of constant communication and availability is virtually always expressed nostalgically. A degree of romanticization is constitutive for any critique of the network form; after all, much like the "networked state" discussed above deserves critical scrutiny, the impulses for and processes of disconnection ("Entnetzung") are no neutral perspectives either but carry social and political implications of their own (7–10).

4.5. Fleeting Powers, Cancelled Futures: "Disconnect to Reconnect"

Despite satirical exaggeration, Scotty's concert at the book's end is set in a bleak future. Alex's crooked marketing scheme confers the event with a tinge of corruption, its venue at New York City's ground zero is haunted simultaneously by the palpable absence of the Twin Towers and the stifling regime of surveillance that followed their collapse, "the price of safety" signified by omnipresent helicopters in the sky (339). Most importantly, the supposed star of the show resembles "a decrepit roadie," "a word casing in human form: a shell whose essence has vanished." His "derelict impression" plausibly explains his initial unwillingness to perform: "It's too late. I'm too old. […] The goon won" (340–41). As is the rule in a text that constantly juxtaposes networks' indifference toward the passing of linear time with all that is mortal, not least its aging characters, Scotty's best days lay behind him. The network may expand indefinitely, but life is finite.

But his reluctance to go onstage can also be explained by the ambivalent connections awaiting him. Prior to Bennie's bid to make him "a star" (341), Scotty remained at a safe distance from the alienating networks entangling his old peer. In times of ubiquitous surveillance "Scotty has disappeared. No computer can find him" (89). Similarly, years of affect regulation could not tame "the truly angry one" (55). While Porsche-driving Bennie makes his money producing "shit" (319) and is desperate to be liked, the janitor Scotty manages waste professionally and does not mind solitude. Their diametrical trajectories extend to the aesthetic realm: Scotty plays his self-built lap steel guitar with no commercial purpose in mind (43), remains outside the industry's

commodifying grasp and thus "absolutely pure[.] Untouched" (321). This purity is suggestive of Scotty's dedication to music and his anachronistic existence outside network culture's reach. His "ballads of paranoia and disconnection," rebutting the connexionist paradigm, are "ripped from the chest of a man […] who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years" (344). Isolated in the ever-shrinking "cracks" of a hyper-connected society and resistant to the grip of (digital) networks, the hobby fisherman Scotty is *Goon Squad*'s closest approximation of a solitaire. Coming out of virtual isolation, he anticipates the harsh transformation awaiting him (99). His ambivalence is well-grounded given that growing networks, as suggested earlier, inevitably hollow out their content. This is particularly pressing in the cultural sphere: "Networks, after all, suggest a culture that grows shallower even as it becomes increasingly interconnected" (Jagoda 26). Attractive as the "scotty magnet" may be (55), its exposure to the mass market entails paradoxical risks. His "untouched" music will soon be commodified and despite the egalitarian rhetoric that often accompanies networks, Scotty realizes that they produce peripheries and centers. *Goon Squad* here evokes the aversion to closure that the network form shares with capitalist circulation. Marx and Engels' dictum that, due to capitalism's inherent necessity to expand, "all that is solid melts into air" (77) equally applies to networks and especially to networks under capitalism. The network form enables Egan to interweave myriad narrative strands on social and cultural loss through the imagery of "husks" and "shells" because such a hollowing out is a logical consequence of networks' immanent disinterest in content.

Once he is coaxed onto stage, Scotty unexpectedly signifies "the embodiment of [the audience's] own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar." As a result,

> a swell of approval palpable as rain lifted from the center of the crowd and rolled out toward its edges, where it crashed against buildings and water wall and rolled back at Scotty with redoubled force, lifting him off his stool, onto his feet […], exploding the quavering husk Scotty had appeared to be just moments before and unleashing something strong, charismatic, and fierce (343).

The evident resemblance to the imagery of affect which, like a network, evades clear forms and stable definitions, indicates how the reciprocal intensification that energizes everyone present cannot be attributed to anyone in particular. Its reciprocity works because everyone undertakes the required leap of faith. The audience's support transforms Scotty's "husk" into a personification of artistic truth. In turn, his distinctly analog music momentarily transcends the all-encompassing digital network culture. As the gathered people converge into a cohesive collective that momentarily displaces the network form's hierarchy between center and periphery, a sense of communal

intimacy supplants the stifling cost-benefit equations of personal interactions. Moreover, they overcome the superficial, estranging and—as the reader knows—corrupted networks that brought them together in the first place. In an apparent contradiction, the momentary suspense of their individual connectivity enables meaningful relationships. In this regard, the text stages a moment of "digital detox:" the ostensible removal of technological excess makes 'true connections' possible again. Provoking "tearstained faces of adults," "scant-toothed grins of toddlers," and a "rhapsodic joy" within twentysomething Lulu, Scotty creates transgenerational intimacy (345). Given that different generations within *Goon Squad* usually encounter each other with incomprehension at best, this rapprochement alone attests to his power (Moorey 76). His music is even "fine and powerful enough to eclipse the chopper throb" evoking the traumas of 9/11 and its aftermath (343).

Goon Squad therefore ends on a cautiously optimistic note about art's ability to trouble network culture's totalizing tendency. Recalling the strategies of reader involvement, the text's strength in this regard lies not in mimesis, but in the reader's praxis. The individually malleable experience of each reader facilitates a potential for subjective immersion, but such transformative effects come with a time limit. Constrained to the duration of the experience itself, even the most powerful epiphanies remain transient and merely 'reset the clock' in the perpetual pursuit of intimate encounters. The slideshow chapter explicitly deliberates this momentary suspense through pauses in rock songs. Falsely signaling an end which is then deferred a little longer, such pauses affect brief relief: "But then the song *does* actually end, because every song ends, obviously, and THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL" (289, original emphasis).

Rather than accomplishing closure or even heralding a new beginning, Scotty's performance signifies such a pause in the sense of how one character remarks in a moment of euphoria: "Sure, everything is ending […] but not yet" (139). After the concert's collective excitement subsides, Alex feels both "weirdly depressed as well as oppressed by the need to hide his depression" next to Bennie's "prolonged state of euphoria" (345–46). Whereas Alex senses the affective force to be gone, the latter's escapist impulse leads him to extend his emotional high before, as the reader anticipates, his mania will give way to depression once more. As the "hinge" creating digital word of mouth for his protégé's performance, Bennie is ready to reap the yield of Scotty's connective potential. The communal delight comes at the cost of incorporating his

"underground" music; the "songs no one had ever heard" are immediately commodified and, shortly thereafter,

> it's hard to know anymore who was really *at* that first Scotty Hausmann concert—more people claim it than could possibly have fit into the space, capacious and mobbed though it was. Now that Scotty has entered the realm of myth, everyone wants to own him. And maybe they should. Doesn't a myth belong to everyone? (344, original emphasis).

The allusion to (the lack of) creative ownership, surfacing early on in Bennie's disdain for the "postpiracy generation," is suggestive (28). It is more important to have attended—or to have been *seen* attending—a significant occasion than to have experienced whatever the occasion was about in the first place. That "more people claim [to have seen him] than could possibly have," confirms Scotty's early insight that "one key ingredient of so-called experience is the delusional faith that it is unique and special, that those included in it are privileged and those excluded from it are missing out" (103). Although ownership of Scotty's "myth" could entail the appreciation of his apparent artistic complexity, it here involves the mindless appropriation of his music by toddlers through their "kiddie handset[s]" (320). Scotty's "[a]rt *justifies* a gathering that has already happened, that has already been made to happen through canny marketing; it does not *cause* the gathering" (Konstantinou, *Cool* 266, original emphasis). That he ends up a hyper-mediated Rockstar not only proves Scotty's skepticism right, it also indicates one of *Goon Squad*'s many cyclical developments: From the very start, the 'authentic' rock music that Scotty represents and Bennie mourns—the text evokes "Monterey Pop and Woodstock" (344)—owed its success to its circulation on television (Carson). *Goon Squad* indicates that movements toward disconnection can ironically only be articulated within the network and through the network's means. Even though the notion of the network is not of much help when reflecting on "the most basic rupture or gap" (Ngai, "Network" 384), any attempt to conceptualize the move to dissolve networks as distinct *from* or as a mere disturbance *within* them is futile. Rather, both movements toward and away from the network are co-constitutive. To put it differently, *Goon Squad* stages what a popular slogan of the digital detox industry has advised for some time: one needs to "disconnect to reconnect" (Stäheli 11–12, 57).

The "cyclical or spiral" time in *Goon Squad* both contests teleological conceptions of straightforward progress(ion) and, by reproducing what is familiar, simultaneously eases the anxiety caused by postmodern contingency (Moling 72). Conversely, such cyclical patterns beg the question whether the future could hold something truly different. For one, Mark Fisher

skeptically deliberates "the slow cancellation of the future" (6), a phrase originally coined by Franco Berardi to explore how the late 20th century frustrated various Hegelian teleologies that subscribed to optimistic notions of progress. Fisher draws on this notion to point to "the sheer persistence of recognisable forms" and the "deflation of expectations" within music culture. Whereas music had evolved in abrupt but frequent spurts before, the last decades have been "oppressed by a crushing sense of finitude and exhaustion."

> The feeling of belatedness, of living after the gold rush, is as omnipresent as it is disavowed. Compare the fallow terrain of the current moment with the fecundity of previous periods and you will quickly be accused of 'nostalgia.' But the reliance of current artists on styles that were established long ago suggests that the current moment is in the grip of a *formal* nostalgia (8, original emphasis).

Fisher here refers to Jameson's writing on postmodernism's "nostalgia mode," meaning the perpetual recycling of recognizable forms and techniques (*Postmodernism* 20; Fisher 11). Contrasting this cultural stasis to the increasing political, economic and technological volatility since the 1970s, Fisher concludes "that culture has lost the ability to grasp and articulate the present" (9). When the cultural response to social velocity is self-referentiality, art's ability to confront the world in the now is fading.

Not least because of the focus on music, Fisher's observations relate to time's precarious status within *Goon Squad*, whose narrative cancels various forms of (innocently imagined) futures and virtually all of whose characters are plagued by the "feeling of belatedness."[22] At the text's end, Scotty's 'authentic' concert resembles the performative anachronism that Fisher identifies as representative for the "timeless" (11)—meaning ahistorical—present. The obsessive loops through time on display in such anticipations of retrospection or chases after a past mimic the gradual or "slow" loss of future. Amidst the last chapter's technologically induced disaffection, communal intimacy is not affected by innovation or revolt, but by a recourse to a musical style which by then is about fifty years old.

On the one hand, this narrative return to the past yet again conforms to the network form, whose lateral spatialization of time thwarts any qualitative difference between past, present and future. Like Scotty's concert attests, network culture will eventually (re)integrate anything that

[22] This is a prominent theme throughout Egan's oeuvre, who herself recalls the feeling of being "born too late" for the countercultural upheaval (in A. Schwartz). *The Invisible Circus* of 1994, Egan's first novel, interrogates this motive prominently through the protagonist Phoebe's retracing of the path of her older sister who was just old enough to dive into San Francisco's counterculture of the late 1960s.

remains outside. *Goon Squad* shows these connective patterns to be dominated by a market logic of mass culture. As indicated before, the network's perpetual search for new links prevents closure much like circulation in the capitalist marketplace. On the level of form, Egan's striving for "a lateral feeling" (in Julavits) when drafting *Goon Squad* then suggests a polyphony of narratives without clear hierarchies between characters and stories. Moreover, its fundamental openness reveals that a literary text adhering to the network form under capitalism cannot offer narrative closure without formally betraying this premise. For Nicholas Brown, *Goon Squad* "foreground[s] a kind of experience only in order to subsume it under a structure that, in giving experience a meaning, undercuts its character as experience." The "structure" in question is "the market," so that *Goon Squad* depicts "the problem of experience as a version of the problem of the market" (82). While this is most obvious for Scotty's almost-instantaneously commodified concert, one might add with Ngai that in the post-Fordist context, the problem of the market approximates the problem of the network.

By reflexively addressing such regimes and its own implication within them, *Goon Squad* not only explores the contradictions of the network paradigm without overt didacticism. Taken together, its vignettes of various voices, locations, and times as well as their complex *relations to each other* convey considerable "literary knowledge of economy" (Newfield 22–23). Though the totality of network culture remains beyond comprehension, *Goon Squad*'s impulse for a reflection about this very condition aids a suffused knowledge about the networked condition. Alongside other formally ambitious recent fiction concerned with the network form, such as Juliana Spahr's *The Transformation* (cf. Ngai, "Network"), Egan's *Goon Squad* approaches Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping," an attempted ontological understanding of the present that seeks to grasp "the moment of the multinational network" in its current constellation (Buchanan, *Jameson* 106; cf. Jagoda 27).

Notably, a gradual loss or cancellation of the future implies a remaining residue of future, and in this sense *Goon Squad*'s resistance to closure does not merely mimic capitalist circulation, it also points toward a flicker of hope based on this very remainder. *Goon Squad*'s narrative ends after Scotty provides a last brief instance of intimacy, but the reader may conceive another such 'intimate glitch' beyond the framework of the book. Though Bennie has so far eschewed the intimate moments in which he could address and reflect upon his pains, he might come to terms with the

dreadful (dis)connections of his past. In different ways, both Fisher and Egan ponder today's inability to imagine a different tomorrow. The connexionist hegemony prevents any imaginary beyond the networked condition within *Goon Squad*—or without, as its narrative offshoot *The Candy House* attest. What art can do, however, and this signifies *Goon Squad*'s success, is to reflexivize this internalized subjectivity. Though Egan's playful appropriation of the network form deviates from the demanding aesthetics Ngai identifies in obsessive transcriptions of networks' complexity ("Network" 378), it nevertheless confronts its own as well as the reader's entrapment in the networked marketplace. Instead of laboring to convey what is at stake through endless enumerations and excursions, *Goon Squad* charts the convolutions emanating across five decades and three continents. In contrast to its characters wondering, in a nod to the text's bisection, "what happened between A and B" (106) the readers are able—and called upon—to explore this question for themselves and to reflect upon the network form as an overbearing social paradigm.

Despite his resistance, even *Goon Squad*'s most "solitary person" is ultimately integrated (334). Network culture's grasp and double binds seem inescapable. Yet in turn, its inherent deferral of closure allows for the glimmering emergence of "pauses" in which the network's abolition becomes imaginable, the very form that reduces them to glimmers in the first place. In this regard, *Goon Squad* not only confirms Levine's insight that the network is "a form absolutely crucial to our grasp of […] society itself" (113), it also encourages a reflection on how to change it.

5. Poetics of Indifference in Tao Lin's *Taipei*

> What inspired you to write *Taipei*?
> Nothing.
> Nothing?
> I had to do something. I was just sitting around with nothing to do. The big part of it is probably money. And then the subject matter is just what I know most about.
>
> Tao Lin interviewed by Doretta Lau, *Wall Street Journal*

Tao Lin produces literature at an impressive rate. In addition to his editorial work as a publisher and film producer (Lin, "Website"), he authored four novels, two collections of poetry, a short-story collection, a novella and a memoir well before turning forty.[23] This prolific output can in part be explained by the historical moment. Lin belongs to a generation of writers who employed the participatory affordances of home computers and broadband internet to build their career without institutional help. Instead of taking the *Program Era*'s route through MFA degrees and literary journals, he continuously accumulated new readers through his blogs and social media channels (Sansom). Lin figured centrally in the "alternative literature" or "alt-lit" community, a circle of self-publishing writers and literary bloggers interested in self-exposure most active from the late 2000s to the mid-2010s that rejuvenated literary autofiction in the social media age (Goldsmith; Sieben). When some of its central figures, "alt-lit godfather" Lin among them (Worthen), were accused of emotional and in some cases sexual exploitation around 2014, this communal self-conception crumbled. Because he had already managed to enter more conventional avenues of the publishing industry, Lin's writing career survived the short-lived "alt-lit" scene. His three most recent books, *Taipei* (2013), *Trip* (2018) and *Leave Society* (2021), are published by one of the 'Big Five,' Vintage Books, a division of Penguin Random House.

For his early publications, Lin relied on relentless self-marketing. His brazen efforts in garnering attention gained so much infamy among observers that, in his early years, Lin was "probably less appreciated as either poet or fiction writer than notorious as a publicity hound and

[23] See Lin's *You Are A Little Bit Happier Than I Am*; *Bed*; *Shoplifting From American Apparel*; *Eeeee eee eeee*; *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy*; *Richard Yates*; *Taipei*; *Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change* and *Leave Society*. Lin has also co-authored a book of "Selected Tweets" (Gonzalez and Lin) and extensively published poetry, prose and essays online.

overproducer" (Ashton, "Poetry" 222). His publicity stunts are numerous, but because an insightful example demonstrating the entrepreneurial mindset pervading his activities will be discussed in section 5.3, it suffices to state at this point that the (literary) market is of central importance for Lin's writing.

Although Lin's *Taipei* hardly qualifies as a "novel" (more on that below), it nevertheless highlights the novelistic form's economic underpinning in its contemporary complexity, an aspect which at least since Ian Watt's study on the topic is seen as integral (Puckett). Furthermore, the book offers a promising case study for understanding intersubjective intimacy amidst the boundless demands of both labor and the market. While the characters of Lin's earlier fiction work minimum wage jobs, *Taipei*'s Paul is a semi-professional writer who does not distinguish between his "life" and "work." As his work is all-encompassing, all spheres of his life, including the intimacies he strives for, are subject to cost-benefit analysis.

After section 5.1 introduces *Taipei*, Lin's writing will be discussed as an uneasy case of autofiction and as a literary illustration for "convergence culture" (section 5.2). Drawing on Bröckling's work, section 5.3 analyzes *Taipei*'s Paul as an "entrepreneurial self" whose attitude toward the world can, somewhat counterintuitively, be summarized as indifferent. Section 5.4 conversely unpacks this ostensible contradiction through Rahel Jaeggi's understanding of "alienation" as an indicator of Paul's deficient rather than absent relations. *Taipei*'s narrative correlates to its characters' habitual indifference through its resolute refusal to clearly fit a genre or entertain its readers with a dramatic arc, character development or stylistic variation. Section 5.5 shows that this very indifference toward the conventional pleasures of consuming literature not only indicates a degree of autonomy as a piece of art; paradoxically, it also enables an intensified form of reception for those readers who recognize this indifference toward the world.

5.1. Intimacy at a Distance

> In mid-June, one dark and rainy afternoon, Paul woke and rolled onto his side and opened his MacBook sideways. At some point, maybe twenty minutes after he'd begun refreshing Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Gmail in a continuous cycle—with an ongoing, affectless, humorless realization that his day 'was over'—he noticed with confusion, having thought it was a.m., that it was 4:46 p.m. He slept until 8:30 p.m. and 'worked on things' in the library until midnight and was two blocks from his room, carrying a mango and two cucumbers and a banana in a plastic bag, when Daniel texted 'come hang out, Mitch bought a lot of coke.' (Lin, *Taipei* 76)

This passage encapsulates the prevailing mood in *Taipei*, in which the reader accompanies Paul, a barely fictionalized version of Lin, through his life as a young writer in New York City. The quote is representative for Paul's habitual state of disorientation and listlessness, his reliance on drugs and the "'work'" related to his literary career. In the course of the uneventful year and half chronicled in *Taipei*, Paul goes on a book tour for his recently published novel, pursues several love interests and twice visits his parents in Taiwan, who have recently moved back to their home country. The book details a series of mundane dialogues interspersed with prosaic perceptions—but hardly tells a story. If "plot" refers to the deliberate arrangement of events that brings out (meaningful) relations among them, *Taipei* does not have one. Instead, the procedural logic on display in the quoted passage persists throughout: One event is followed by the next without even an implication of cause-and-effect. In Paul's words, he "felt like a digression that had forgotten from what it digressed and was continuing ahead in a confused, choiceless searching" (67). The most perceptible compositional work is Lin's habit to leave episodes unfinished or partially elided, yet this causes neither suspense nor some other dramaturgical effect.

"Protagonist" is a similarly futile category for Paul. Although he clearly is troubled by several maladies, this is a point of interest neither for him nor the text as a whole, so that the agency and struggle constitutive for a protagonist (from Ancient Greek *prōtagōnistḗs,* "a chief actor") is absent. Whether it is Paul or his peers, the text accompanies a selection of characters devoid of emotional depth whose desires and problems remain static. Relatedly, one has every right to ask whether a text bare of plot, dramaturgy and character development would fit even the notoriously vague category of the "novel" that *Taipei*'s book cover professes. As the remainder of this chapter shows, *Taipei*'s refusal to make sense in a conventional understanding might rather be its central characteristic.

The quoted passage is equally representative for *Taipei*'s conspicuously affectless language. Lin's style signals a preliminary endpoint in modernity's turn from the art of storytelling

toward soberly relayed information. Already bemoaned a century ago in Walter Benjamin's "Storyteller" essay, James Wood has more recently observed with similar skepticism that "some of the more impressive novelistic minds of our age do not think that language and the representation of consciousness are the novelist's quarries any more. Information has become the new character" (Wood). Yet despite its appearance, Lin's much debated style has undergone a careful evolution. In McGurl's view, Lin's early works may have adhered to conventional minimalism, but *Taipei* signifies a shift "from aggressively banal to brilliantly weird […] This is minimalism gone maximal" (McGurl, *Everything* 222). Lin's meticulous editing process results in a "concrete/literal language" that he once compared to the "neutral" and "severely detached" prose of news agencies (Tietz; Rourke). Virtually all of his characters, including "Paul, 26" (3), indeed appear as if they were news story items, and not of an engaging journalistic genre. In addition to effecting distance, this style helps Lin "to mitigate the sequentiality and interiority of prose, to render [his] sentences, paragraphs, and novels more like an image" and aesthetically approach a (flat) textual equivalent to the "Selfie Aesthetics" ubiquitous in the digital sphere (Worthen). Lin's style gestures toward the sterile language of machine-learning technology producing automated reports about sports or the stock market (Graefe), which foreshadows the importance of cybernetic feedback loops for and within *Taipei* (see section 5.3). However, the implied objectivity that usually accompanies such neutral language is elusive throughout. In the passage quoted above, the scare quotes indicate uncertainty both about what Paul does and whether it can be earnestly called "work." Similarly, Paul realizes his mistake "*maybe* twenty minutes" into his dreary routine. Given the "dimly aware," "detached" and "surreally distant" states of mind of Paul and those around him, the narrative is reliable only about its unreliability (34, 160). In other words, the only thing that the countless qualifications and relentless sense of disorientation convey with certainty is the entire narrative's uncertainty. This goes so far that at times Paul speaks "slowly and mostly incomprehensibly, unsure what he was trying to say" and even feels "unsure if he [is] confused" (215, 130).

In addition to Paul's general difficulty in interpreting social cues to be addressed below, McGurl rightly notes that *Taipei*'s phenomenological ambiguity reflects "the new pharmacological cornucopia whose consumption it tracks" (*Everything* 222). Rather than pursuing transgressive experiences or (self-)exploration, however, Paul and his friends rely on pharmaka as a form of self-medication. Paul takes prescription pharmaceuticals, street drugs and psychedelic substances to numb his anxieties and paralyzing self-consciousness. He summarizes the paradoxical effect of his

dependence well when he opines: “They’ll think we’re on drugs if we’re not on drugs. We’re normal when we’re on drugs” (149). Within this logic of adjustment Paul resolves early on to “only appear in public if he’d ingested sufficient drugs to not primarily be a source of anxiety, bleakness, awkwardness, etc. for himself and/or others” (87). He understands his escalating drug use to be “classically ‘not a good sign’” (74) but withdrawal is no option either for it regularly entails

> an excruciating combination of social anxiety and […] disintegrating functioning, including tremulous fingers and what felt like an inability to control or predict the volume and pitch of his voice and a helpless sensation that his face—especially if he tried to mollify its severe appearance, which he would need to do if anyone asked him a question—might begin quivering or flinching uncontrollably (122).

This quote is equally illustrative for *Taipei*’s restless language incapable of clear and concise communication. These “sentences struggl[ing] to conclude” mirror Paul’s pervasive sense of crisis (McGurl, *Everything* 222). The unusual syntax, especially with regards to temporal markers, convey how Paul’s unease about his outward appearance first effects a sense of disorientation and then escalates into panic. Although he may appear paralyzed or absent-minded toward others, Paul is never able to shed the feedback loop of his destructive self-awareness. Again and again, his emotional distress triggers an inward escapism and disengagement from his environment. Realizing that his attempts to fit in fail, Paul routinely drops out instead.

In adherence to its documentary aesthetic verging on transcription, *Taipei* describes intense feelings at great length and in imaginative ways. But because its entire world is perceived through Paul’s solipsistic mind, the text remains incapable of expressing them (cf. Völz, “Affektlagen”). Jennifer Moore observes that, in Lin’s early poetry, “his aesthetic question is how to render emotional extremes with the least possible amount of emotion.” This assessment remains pertinent for *Taipei*: Its conceptual point of interest lies in offering the reader the narrative proximity of a rigorous subjectivism while simultaneously withholding everything that would fill his characters with life. Stylistically mirroring the “mask-like expression” that Paul puts on in public (3), the text offers what Yousef calls “mere proximity, intimacy […] without content” (3).

Notably, such obfuscation frequently works as a contradictory precondition for intimacy in Lin’s prose. For despite the fact that his anxieties signify a substantial handicap, Paul’s desire for meaningful relationships does drive him to meet people. Or as he puts it: “I only go to things to find a girlfriend” (10). At one such “thing,” a party, his anxieties are numbed enough for him to “uncharacteristically [approach] an intriguing, attractive stranger named Laura” (26). Although she is first “annoyed” by his drunk obtrusion and then counters his invasive questions with “a

challenging, vigilante expression," their somewhat hostile encounter intrigues both of them enough to connect online and then go for dinner the next day (27):

> once seated, with a slightly desperate expression, not looking at Paul, she focused on signaling a waiter. Paul also focused on signaling a waiter. Laura ordered a margarita, then sometimes turned her head 90 degrees, to her right, to stare outside–at the sidewalk, or the quiet street—with a self-consciously worried expression, seeming disoriented and shy in a distinct, uncommon manner indicating to Paul an underlying sensation of 'total yet failing' (as opposed to most people's 'partial and successful') effort, in terms of the social interaction but, it would often affectingly seem, also generally, in terms of existing. Paul had gradually recognized this demeanor, the past few years, as characteristic, to some degree, of every person, maybe since middle school, with whom he'd been able to form a friendship or enter a relationship (or, it sometimes seemed, earnestly interact and not feel alienated or insane) (31–32).

Their awkwardness exemplifies the troubled relational longing that is commonplace in Lin's fiction. Paul not only recognizes that both he and Laura lack the social skills to smoothly navigate the date's interactions, he also realizes that because they share this incompetence, it might be something to bond over. The text even posits "this demeanor" of "self-consciously worried expression[s]" to be Paul's prerequisite for having meaningful connections to others. The passage also hints at a likely reason for why Paul is interested in Laura: Her "distinct, uncommon manner" might be socially awkward, but, in contrast to superficial attitudes, her "total yet failing […] effort" is authentic. Both trying to momentarily escape their own encounter by "signaling a waiter," both unable to fake conventional attitudes, the two recognize each other as equally helpless—which is why they might as well be sincere to each other. Their mutual exposure and vulnerability create the foundation for intimacy.

Taipei does not merely offer acute observations on how digital paradigms encroach into 'real life,' as when Lin states that he "think[s] in tweets now" (in Friedlander). What is more, the text accompanies a digital subjectivity in an only partially digitalized world (McDougall; Sheu). Paul makes sense of his environment in "frames per second," through degrees of "resolution" or "pixilation" and feels "as if beta testing" his life (248, 20, 65). Notably, this perspective frequently focuses on deficiencies. Paul's drug dealer with the fitting name "Android" "seem[s] to shutdown, as a person, into a dormant state" in the middle of a conversation and only returns "to functioning" "after maybe two seconds" (153). Interacting most comfortable by digital means, Paul views the world through computational paradigms such as binaries, numerics and cybernetics. Disputes with friends are "problems to be solved[,]" though he is "three or four skillsets away" of doing so (10).

The consistently distanced description of intimate matters connects *Taipei* to the discussion of reemerging sincerity in recent fiction. In certain ways, Lin's literature fits the transformation of

literary styles 'after postmodernism' (as discussed in section 2.2). Though *Taipei* evokes postmodernist aesthetics through the omnipresence of brand names and the frequent use of seemingly ironic scare quotes, the passages quoted above do not bespeak joyous self-referentiality. After all, most brands refer to pharmaceuticals designed to treat depression or anxiety. Conversely, the book's interest in and expression of detachment forms a counterintuitive basis for connection. In this sense, *Taipei*'s idiosyncratic prose not only adheres to Paul's suspicion that awkwardness indicates a degree of fidelity and trustworthiness. It moreover aligns Lin, at least in these instances, with Wallace's "anti-rebels" who "[r]isk disapproval" by being too sincere (Wallace, "E" 193). *Taipei*'s peculiar style formally reinforces its thematic emphasis of social inaptitude and estrangement. Since the near convergence of author and character moreover implies the text's supposedly faithful relationship to the empirical world, the following section examines *Taipei*'s uneasy relationship to the genre of autofiction.

5.2. Uneasy Autofiction

Although autobiographical writing virtually always makes claims of veracity, the blurry line between fact and fiction in (life) writing has recently attracted more attention under the rubric of "autofiction," deriving from autobiography and fiction. Serge Doubrovsky coined the term for his 1977 novel *Fils,* which he describes as a "[f]iction, of strictly real events and facts; *autofiction* if you like" (in Gronemann 241, original emphasis). Doubrovsky sought to trouble "The Autobiographical Pact," Philipp Lejeune's seminal theorization of autobiography. Lejeune hypothesizes reader and author of an autobiography to enter a tacit contract underwritten by the author's proper name (Eakin and Lejeune 19–20). He accounts for the poststructuralist insight that, as a linguistic representation, language can only refer to reality as accurately as possible, but never be quite "true." Given this limitation, autobiography's onomastic link between author, narrator and character, i.e. the proclaimed connection between the textual "I" and empirical author, nevertheless mark it as a "referential" genre to be distinguished from fictional works (22–23). Doubrovsky now problematized this conception by presenting an "I" that "simultaneously did *and* did not refer to the author," effectively mixing autobiography and fiction within one character (Worthington 8, original emphasis). This understanding does not primarily point to the deliberate invention of things, but to the impossibility of knowing oneself. Doubrovsky conceives of autofictional writing as a psychoanalytically inspired "talking cure" and adapts it through a "poetics of an existential writing-about-the-self," in which narrativization necessarily entails fictionalization. Perpetually

circling an inaccessible "real subjectivity" Doubrovsky's texts must subsequently be understood, labelled and marketed as novels (Gronemann 241, 242).

Other perspectives on autofiction, such as Vincent Colonna's, in turn emphasize the genre's constant shifts between referentiality and fictionality to include texts that, for example, eschew realistic perceptions and instead explore their authorial fantasies by placing the protagonist in scenarios that are recognizable as non-autobiographic (Zipfel 34–35; Worthington 10–11). Gerard Genette proposes another differentiation between "true" and "false" autofictions (*Fiction* 54–87). Whereas the former include texts which are marked as fictional but nevertheless adhere to Lejeune's pact by linking the character, narrator and author by name, the latter signify autobiographies that shun such a pact and deny their genre, for example to avoid legal consequences (77n31; cf. Zipfel 33). This wider understanding allows for a categorization of literary texts which depict author-characters in markedly fictional scenarios that either violate the realist code or show identifiable inconsistencies between author and character (Worthington 8–9). This way, both ancient adventure stories as well as Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* can be understood as autofictions *avant la lettre*. Due to its liminal position between factuality and fictionality, autofiction not only blurs the boundary to non-fiction writing, but necessarily also the one toward fiction. Since the distinction between autofiction and autobiography emerges in degrees, the genre can neither be categorically demarcated from autobiographical novels. Like autofictional writing, many autobiographical novels offer both fictional and autobiographical "pacts" only to ignore the distinction hereafter and instead engage in self-conscious experiments about the interrelation of real life and fiction (Missinne 468).

Since Doubrovsky's intervention in the late 1970s, autofiction has been widely debated in France (Gronemann 241–42) and, as the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature for Annie Ernaux exemplifies, autofiction's French strand has gained global renown. Such an awareness has taken root only belatedly in the United States, but as Marjorie Worthington observes, by the 2010s "[t]he autofictional trope has become so common in American fiction that it almost seems a requirement for contemporary authors to engage in" (2). Indeed, a sizeable part of recent US fiction published to critical acclaim combines autobiography and fiction, ranging from Teju Cole's *Open City*, Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park*, Sheila Heti's *How should a Person be?* and *Motherhood* to the autofictional trilogies of Chris Kraus (*I love Dick*, *Torpor* and *Summer of Hate*) and Ben Lerner

(*Leaving the Atocha Station*, *10:04* and *The Topeka School*). In a wider sense, the genre-bending texts of Maggie Nelson or Claudia Rankine can also be considered autofiction. (Section 6 discusses the role of Kraus' *I Love Dick* as inspiring recent autofictional with regards to Browning's *The Gift*.)

Though American literary history has its share of autofictions that predate the term, Worthington traces an increase of self-consciously blended texts with autobiographical and fictional elements to the late 1960s. Proclamations about "the death of author" as well as increased accessibility of the writing profession to women and non-white authors as a result of the period's cultural struggles produced "authorial anxieties" particularly in white male writers (5). Hence, it was them who, through their engagement with the postmodern destabilization of the subject position, drew attention to the limitations of the author figure while also seeking to revitalize it. In Worthington's summary, "autofiction serves paradoxically as a postmodern challenge to traditional notions of authority and truth and as a somewhat conservative attempt to reassert those traditions" (21). Lin's early career as described above evokes a third and more recent cause for authorial anxiety in Worthington's view, namely the ongoing democratization of literary writing. This was enabled by digital technology which has, through a dramatic quantitative increase of writers had a qualitative impact on what it "means to be a creative genius—to be an author" (5). On the side of reception, Worthington notes how the recent popularity of autofiction, a genre demanding "constant narrative code-switching" (16), indicates the successful dissemination of poststructural thought. In autofiction, context appears to be as important as the text itself because the latter cannot claim meaning without referring to signifiers in the outside world. This resuscitates the author who, through e.g. what Genette calls "epitexts," helps to make sense of the literary text. Conversely, by relentlessly drawing attention to the—however blurry—line between fact and fiction autofictional writing insists that this very distinction remains important and counters poststructuralism's inclination toward panfictionality (21).

Before discussing how *Taipei* troubles the genre of autofiction, it should be noted that the concept is not without its critics. Robert Walter-Jochum points out that despite proclamations to the contrary, scholarship on autofiction frequently remains inconsistent about heeding poststructural insights (55–58). For example, many critics reconsider the referential potential of autofictional texts in the context of their presumed poetological function, but nevertheless presume

a coherence between the described events in a text and a writing subject that stages itself according to its authentic intentions. However, once the interventions of the likes of Foucault, Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes are taken seriously, such coherence cannot be taken for granted—at least not on the side of textual production. Instead, it can only ever emerge as an effect of its reception, produced by the readers who perceive overlapping texts and discourses to create a sense of authorial coherence (Walter-Jochum 65–112).

How does *Taipei* relate to autofiction, a label frequently associated with Lin's fiction (e.g. Lorentzen, "Sheila")? For his writing, Lin does "little to no research on facts about the world, but I researched my own life. I researched my Gmail account, behaviors, thoughts, feelings, and history" (in Plummer). Marketed as a novel and revolving around a hardly veiled version of the author, *Taipei* seems a clear fit. Yet if autofiction's voyeuristic allure and aesthetic success depend on the unresolved tensions between fact and fiction, *Taipei*'s indifference toward this very opposition troubles this designation. Doubrovsky's doubt about whether one can ever record the world or oneself truthfully implies an intrinsic motivation for the writing process and bespeaks a cautious, yet ultimately optimistic view on his profession. Conversely, *Taipei* answers the question of writing's ability of truth-telling so clearly in the negative that it is never even brought up in the text. The following scene illustrates Paul's fundamental problems when seeking to convert experience into language. While giving a reading "off his MacBook screen[,]" he realizes "that he was reading a sentence from something else he'd been working on that had been pasted apparently into the wrong file." He nevertheless reads on:

> The transparency and total effort, with none spent on explanation or concealment or experimentation, of what the universe desired—to hug itself as carefully, as violently and patiently, as had been exactly decided upon, at some point, with gravity—was [something] (139, original squared bracket).

He recalls using "[something]" "as a placeholder after trying combinations of synonyms for 'affecting' and 'confusing' and longer descriptions like 'an actualized ideal, inside of which any combination of parts could never independently attain'" (139). As this work-in-progress illustrates, Paul indeed engages in an exploratory form of sense-making through writing, but his search for linguistic expression reliably fails. That is, this search for meaning fails only on those rare occasions when it is pursued in the first place: Because his audience had "laughed almost every time a drug was mentioned" in his reading, Paul first considers either substituting "'Klonopin' or 'Xanax'" for "[something]" or "explaining the bracket usage" (139). But rather than making this

flat joke or inviting his audience to think along, Paul chooses to abort the reading on this very sentence. Instead of initiating an exchange on the relationship between the world and (his) art by letting his audience in on his creative process, he stops such a discussion before it can even begin.

If autofictions contain poetic articulations in the form of self-reflexive contemplations about literature's potentials and limitations (Zipfel 36), *Taipei* clearly accentuates the latter. Despite Paul's fondness for metaphysical musings, the narrative sustains its sober realist code throughout. As such, the text acknowledges that, as the sum of the perceptions of a character immersed in hypermediated online environments and dependent on consciousness-altering substances, it does not even come close to offering a reality beyond Paul's solipsism. In other words, *Taipei*'s ruminating style, its adverbial excess, myriad parenthetical clauses and cautious qualifications are symptoms of a representational crisis. Accordingly, it has been called a self-reflexive work of „pathological realism" that, by offering withered representations of representations, sheds light on the inadequacy of realist methods under postmodern conditions (Ohnesorge et al. 614). Notably, the text does not mourn this state of affairs. Lin's prose not only evokes Benjamin's observation on the vanishing art of storytelling, it also indicates a detached subject position that, according to Lukács, bespeaks the loss of a meaningful relationship to the world. But yet again, Lin's text embraces (and thereby defuses) what would be Lukács' central charge, namely the further reification of a capitalist society through a mode of description unable or unwilling to contextualize the mysteries of the contemporary condition (110–47).

In contrast to texts attempting to represent an ever more complex world in the modes of "hysterical realism" or scrupulous "hyperrealism" mentioned above, *Taipei* hardly addresses the problem. Unlike the novelists that Wood and others have in mind, Lin's prose does not "make emotionally real to its readers the scale of interconnection" in a globalized world (Robbins, "Too" 80). To the contrary, Jason Gladstone argues, it brings out states of nonconnection within this order of globalization: "*Taipei* insists that access to economic, cultural, and technological networks enables neither interconnection nor reconfiguration" (87). Although *Taipei* depicts a similarly networked condition to that guiding Egan's *Goon Squad* (see chapter 4), it "participate[s] in the genre of the contemporary antinetwork novel" in that its "networks are unavailable to do the work of interconnection" (91). Paul's contradictory position as a reluctant yet very effective entrepreneur chimes with the discursive valorization of shyness. After having been pathologized early in the 20th century, shyness experienced a "recoding as a social and economic quality" in recent decades: "in

the figure of the shy, modern society discovers incommunicability as a potential and corrective[.]" In adherence to Lin's style, *Taipei* mutely details rather than condemns that this perspective is "at times translated all too fast into economic categories" (Stäheli 260–61).

As indicated, Paul's writing is almost always screened-off by the vague formulation about him "working on things," a phrase whose status as an ironic or earnest description remains unresolved (19 with scare–quotes, 81 without). With few exceptions, such as the passage quoted above, his writing of literature remains unaddressed. Accompanying an author-character, but showing little to no interest in writing itself, *Taipei* counteracts yet another of autofiction's characteristics. Much like his drug-use, Paul's creative work fulfills a therapeutic function but carries no promise of transcendence. When asked in an interview about the cryptic passage quoted above, Lin confirms the limited potential of (Paul's) writing: "[y]eah, he doesn't know what that means and I don't know either" (in Friedlander).

Notably, the strength of Lin's alternatively enigmatic or banal prose is regularly seen to lie in its very lack of tangible meaning as well as in the strange elegance of its futile efforts. This, at any rate, is the impression Lin leaves on his fellow writers, some of whom stress that his literature is a record of the contemporary moment that ought not to be judged in mere aesthetic terms. Ellis calls him "the most interesting prose stylist of his generation" but cautions that this "doesn't mean that 'Taipei' isn't a boring novel" (@BretEastonEllis). Lerner appreciates Lin's work as "a frank depiction of the rhythm of a contemporary consciousness or lack of consciousness" that "has a power that bypasses […] questions of taste entirely. Like it or not, it has the force of the real" (in White). Zadie Smith in turn admits that "Lin's work can be confounding," but asks "isn't it a bit perverse to be angry at artists who deliver back to us the local details of our local reality? What's intolerable in *Taipei* is not the sentences (which are rather fine), it's the life Paul makes us live with him as we read." Lin's style of "full immersion" evokes reality effects: "It might not be pretty—but this is life" (Z. Smith).

Indeed, "this is life"—for contemporary writers. An important qualification which helps to explain why recent autofiction, according to Konstantinou, is not merely concerned with authors' creative struggles, but "obsessed with the process of publishing and the mechanics of the writer's life. It's not just that they're writing what they know. It's that managing their career is central to the content of their being as writers." This insight complicates the line Worthington draws from

self-centered postmodernist texts to the autofiction of today, in which "the individual is increasingly charged with the job of managing his own portfolio of human capital." For Konstantinou, recent autofiction "has more in common with Reality Television than metafiction." Ultimately, Lin's work illuminates "the way contemporary autofiction emerges from the unique collision of art and commerce under neoliberalism" ("Autofiction").

Taipei's claim to authenticity, its "force of the real," also emerges from its many connections to "life" through references to Lin and his online presence. Taken together, they indeed suggest that Paul is "Lin himself in virtually all but name" (Crosthwaite 187). For instance, large portions of the book's dialogue between Paul and Erin, fellow writer and Paul's most serious love interest, correspond verbatim to *Mumblecore*, an apparent documentary Lin and his then-partner Meghan Boyle shot with a laptop webcam. Similar to *Taipei*, the film indulges in the artifice of no artifice by mutely detailing how the couple talks on strolls, in cabs or hotel rooms and eventually gets married in Las Vegas (MDMAfilms)—events of which many are included in the book, albeit with minuscule changes (e.g. 132, 136–37, 147–50). A longer version of the interview conducted with Paul while he is, "as a journalistic angle, […] 'on MDMA,'" can likewise be found online with Lin in Paul's place (*Taipei* 125; Levack). One of the events discussed in the interview in turn is a San Francisco reading Paul/Lin had to abort a few weeks earlier due to the effects of psilocybin mushrooms. Paul holds "a 'contest' on his blog to discern from the livestreamed video what drug he was on during his San Francisco reading" (142). Lin made an analogous post and, due the attention the event had attracted, later published a separate text on it ("contest"; "How").

Adhering to autofiction's liminality, it is thus as imprudent to dispute *Taipei*'s legal disclaimer describing the book as "a work of fiction" as it is to believe that "any resemblance" of its "[n]ames, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents" "is entirely coincidental" (0). Although it partakes in the market-driven focus on personality, *Taipei* simultaneously thwarts the tensions at the genre's core. By mutely reporting a sequence of banalities in a documentary aesthetic devoid of development and affect, it ensures that these loosely connected parts do not come together as a life's story in any conventional sense. The text's disinterest toward the tensions between fact and fiction strips the question about its own fictionality of its urgency. The precision with which the intertextual web connects *Taipei*'s author-character with the empirical author-figure

(as staged by Lin) makes the book's emphasis on "auto" self-evident, but its claim of fictionality questionable. As a result, the recursive loop at autofiction's core comes full circle—and deflates.

Media theorists call this epitextual web of social media, film and (online) literature giving meaning to *Taipei* "convergence culture." Barry Jenkins popularized the term to argue that established and emerging media systems should not be theorized separately and thought of in sequence but rather understood to be in a subtle interplay: "Old media are not being displaced. Rather, their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies" (14). Deliberating the consequences of such a medial conflation for the practice of reading, Jim Collins asserts that a once "thoroughly private experience in which readers engaged in intimate conversation with an author between the pages of a book has become an exuberantly social activity" (4). This is certainly true for the interdependence of "mass media and literary reading" that Collins examines through formats of literary popularization (17). For the authorial generation of Lin, however, the social interaction manifests itself first and foremost in the potentially unlimited availability of authors who engage with their fans and critics in the comment sections of blogs or interviews, social media or via e-mail. In his early years and particularly around the publication of his books, Lin has engaged in incessant online discussions (see comment sections of e.g. Levack; Klassnik; A. D. Jameson). Attesting to his image as a "publicity hound" mentioned above, Lin utilized these intimate exchanges between author and readers (cf. Franzen) to initiate guerrilla marketing for his various literary projects. These online discussions frequently contain doubtful questions about who is actually behind the user "Tao Lin," but the consistency with which this user appears on different platforms over various years as well as accounts on platforms such as "goodreads" and "DISQUS" (designed for coordinating and archiving comments on various websites) make Lin the most plausible candidate (cf. DISQUS; goodreads).[24]

While *Taipei* strips the autofictional intersection between fact and fiction of its appeal, a convergence culture of a different kind promises more analytical benefit: Within the book, the spheres of work (labor) and life (leisure) have converged so thoroughly that Paul ought to be

[24] Nevertheless, all of Lin's statements deserve scrutiny. On his pastime of googling himself, he once stated: "If I'm ever bored, all I have to do is go to a computer and Google myself and see endless entertaining shit, that I also am able to influence by just typing something into Twitter" (Levack). Aware of his ability to manipulate the discourse about himself, Lin has spread lies, fueled rumors and exaggerations about himself. Instead of engaging the irresolvable question of authenticity and veracity in these exchanges, however, this chapter's interest lies in the persona of "Tao Lin."

understood as an "entrepreneurial self." This form of subjectification enables a discussion of the book's most interesting paradox: the contradiction between the emphasis on entrepreneurial initiative on the one side, and a paralyzing sense of alienation on the other.

5.3. An Entrepreneurial Writer

While the actual labor of writing remains invisible throughout *Taipei*, the reader accompanies Paul on an endless sequence of "promotion things:" book tours and signings, panel discussions and interviews (191). Under contract with an independent publisher, Paul is best understood as a self-employed writer, a near-ideal type of the post-Fordist knowledge worker. He can work anywhere and at all times—which he does and, as the text implies, indeed must do to advance his career. Paul's veiled literary "work" is intimately connected to both his life as well as that of Lin, who vowed early on in his career to "never to work a regular job again" (Anderson). This way, *Taipei* dissolves the distinction between the two spheres: Paul is "never not working," but also "not required to be in any particularly geographical space for very long;" he treats "creative work and life as fundamentally continuous," "everything he does is grist for his writing; he is always on a project" (Schratz 230–31). Predictably, the Fordist notion of a work-life balance remains foreign to him. Adapting a thought by Jennifer Ashton, one can assert that *Taipei* describes "a world in which art is indistinguishable from labor, labor is indistinguishable from entrepreneurship, and none of these things is distinguishable from any other experience in that same world," in summary, "a world in which self-expression and human capital are one" ("Labor" 226).

In Bröckling's sociological terminology, Paul represents an "entrepreneurial self," a subject answering "the call to act as an entrepreneur of one's own life" (8). Bröckling works in the wake of Foucault, who identifies the transition from liberalism to neoliberalism in the moment when the entrepreneurial mandate is so pervasive "that the worker himself appears as a sort of enterprise for himself" (*Birth* 225). Dedicated to one of Foucault's central insights, Bröckling views this form of subjectification as actualizing not only in oppressive ways: the ideal type of the entrepreneurial self bestows a sense of purpose and identity on its subject, albeit through a process of perpetual self-optimization in all spheres of life. Given his observation that "[e]ntrepreneurs only exist where there are markets; entrepreneurial activity is aimed at market success" (43), an assessment of the

market's significance both for and within Lin's literature is suitable groundwork for an interpretation of it on the entrepreneurial premise.

Lin himself best illustrates the central role of the market for his oeuvre. In the late summer of 2008, weeks away from the financial crisis that would herald a decade of austerity, Lin published an "initial public offering"—or IPO in the stock market's jargon—of this at his point unfinished and unnamed second novel *Richard Yates*. He offered 60% of the royalties of the forthcoming book in six shares of 10%, $2000 each share. In a blog post advertising his idea (brokers call this a "prospectus"), Lin argues that the money would enable him to quit his daytime job and focus solely on writing. Indeed, Lin "is not just miming the capitalist; he has *become* the capitalist" (Ashton, "Do", original emphasis). Lin's blog post also included a "projected return" for interested buyers in which he claims that, if only for reasons of the literary economy, mainstream literary critics will soon no longer be able to ignore his work despite their persisting reservations:

> If there is more mainstream attention [for the forthcoming novel], and I think there is a 80-90% chance there will be, sales will be 'considerably higher' I think. I feel it is inevitable that I will receive mainstream attention at some point, if only because of my effect on 'the economy,' which mainstream journalists can see (and cannot ignore, due to the nature of publicly-owned companies) when they look at Bookscan, at which point sales of all my books will go up again ("I").[25]

Lin's intuition on mainstream recognition turned out to be correct, for *Richard Yates* was his first book to receive prominent, though mixed, reviews (J. Cohen; Bock). He also accounted for the possibility of unprofitable outcomes, such as when he would "in the long-term, lose $50,000 or something." As if in direct reference to Foucault as quoted above, he declares that, in any case, "the experience of being in part a corporation, or 'publicly-owned company'" would be worth the effort.

While *The Pale King*'s "David Wallace" is adamantly insisting that he is "the real author […] not some abstract persona […] rather like a corporation" (68), Lin sees no contradiction whatsoever between the two. Indeed, "it will help 'fight depression' if I [Lin] become in some way a corporation instead of a person." Lin's statement evokes the notion of "corporate personhood" and anticipates the supreme court's landmark ruling "Citizens United v. FEC" (Winkler) in early 2010. This quasi-corporate rhetoric is not surprising given that Lin is claimed to have had an "army of interns" early in his career already (Gould; Ashton, "Do"). To ensure aesthetic coherence within

[25] Bookscan provides sales data for the book publishing industry and, at the time of Lin's blog post, belonged to Nielsen Company, in turn known for its survey of TV ratings.

Taipei, he likewise worked with a style guide (Plummer). In management guru Tom Peters' vocabulary (see section 2.3), Lin successfully manages *The Brand You*. As he reports in an update shortly thereafter, his literary IPO worked out twofold. Not only did Lin find six investors in under a week, his proposal also garnered widespread media attention, a side effect he had anticipated and discussed in his original post: "this is another thing people can talk about in terms of me and will 'in itself' 'increase sales' in the long term. If anyone buys shares they will have concrete motivation to promote me and that also will increase sales" (Lin, "I").

Paul Crosthwaite regards Lin's self-reflexivity regarding the contemporary particularities of the labor of writing and the book as a commodity as exemplary for the "resourceful—if never pure or uncompromised—strategies via which formally ambitious contemporary writers seek to open up spaces of maneuver immanent to, but not simply determined by, the market" (7). In Crosthwaite's view, Lin has internalized the market logic of his profession to such a high degree that he writes "Market Metafiction:" "a mode […] which is concerned less with the fictionality of the text as such, and more with the ways in which that fictionality solicits or spurns the approval of the literary marketplace" (3). This perspective illuminates *Taipei*'s uneasy relationship to the genre of autofiction: Given its acute awareness of the literary market's "Reality Hunger" (Shields), *Taipei* solicits "the approval of the literary marketplace" by catering to autofiction's discourses of confession, creativity and self-expression, only to then insist that there is nothing to confess, create or express. As Crosthwaite puts it:

> To buy and read *Taipei* […] is to participate in the cycle of marketing, publicity, and promotion that is the narrative's major topic and without which the novel itself would not have appeared, at least in its glossily packaged, major press-backed form—and it is to do so without ever being sure whether the text is unapologetically flaunting this cycle, self-critically satirizing it, or (as all of its surface effects suggest) observing it with the strictest neutrality (187–88).

This assessment chimes with observations by Ashton and Konstantinou. The former perceives Lin's work as focusing on "his own market operations—the circulation both of 'Tao Lin' and of the literary works he produces" ("Poetry" 222). For the latter, "Tao Lin internalized, and was arguably unusually successful at internalizing, if only for a moment, the functions of writer, publisher, and marketer within his own corporate person" ("Autofiction"). His excruciating market awareness enabled Lin to successfully create his brand.

Artistic self-awareness under capitalism is hardly news. For a long time, artists have harnessed the powers of marketing to then offer artworks that deliberately disappoint the

anticipation they had themselves stoked and instead provoke a reflection about art and the marketplace. Andy Warhol's eight-hour long 'anti-film' *Empire*—a steady shot of the empire state building at night—"marked by a total absence of incident" (Danto) is as suitable an example as his equally tiresome transcription novel *a*. Within literature, Lin obviously draws from the Kmart realism of Frederick Barthelme and Ann Beattie, but he is most indebted to the "Literary Brat Pack" of Ellis, Tama Janowitz, and Jay McInerney whose "huge success" was "in large part a product of gossip page appearances and careful marketing, particularly the invention of the "yuppieback" pioneered by Lin's current publisher, Vintage Contemporaries (Ferguson 30). Yuppiebacks came in uniform layout and typography as well as with cover art gesturing toward popular culture rather than "traditional publishing strategies" (31). Some argue that this uniformity even extended toward style and plot (30, 33): The "Blank Generation" wrote "fiction inhabiting a youth culture of fast-lane living—cocaine, nightclubs, Music Television (MTV), and hedonistic abandon" ("Brat"). The similarities to Lin are clear, not least in their provocation of conservative views on literature. *Taipei*'s narrative similarly fits what Jameson calls "pastiche" or "blank parody," imitations of other styles, but "a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives" in historical or political terms (*Postmodernism* 17). Yet this charge loses its critical edge when brought to the explicitly indifferent *Taipei* (see section 5.5). Rather, Lin takes the tendencies underlying the success of his literary predecessors to such an extreme that significant differences emerge. Whereas Ellis et al. describe and arguably indict a culture enthralled by consumerism, self-commodification is the very premise for Lin. His finesse in self-publication and self-marketing indicates that, unlike his 1980s counterparts, the author's sway (and responsibility) now not only encompasses the literary text itself but virtually everything that surrounds it. Instead of creating buzz through the press, Lin skips all intermediaries through social media. The position of the publisher has changed accordingly: With Lin, it now no longer invests in a promising talent, but takes under contract a self-made writer who brings along a devoted fan base.

True to the character of *Taipei* as an apparent transcription, the demands of the market play an equally important role for Paul as they do for Lin. Although hardly anything happens, the text is characterized by incessant bustle guided virtually always by commercial parameters. Paul suffers from an obvious yet undiagnosed depression, sleeps through entire days and heavily self-medicates, but virtually all of his waking hours are filled with career-related activities. As indicated by his ostensible hedonism, Paul seems to be able to do what he wants where and when he wants it. He

goes to numerous parties, sees friends and takes frequent trips (pun intended). However, his boundless profession instrumentalizes all of these activities: He may spend his time at parties sleeping "on sofas after walking mutely through rooms without looking at anyone" and debating when and how to "leave" (74, 5–6), but this very discomfort is an important resource for his writing.

Many of the exchanges with his friends are equally salvaged for his creative process and, finally, virtually all of his journeys, including a trip to his parents in Taiwan are at least in part about "promotion things." Even in the "interim period" between having finished his last book and the corresponding book tour, he strives to be "productive in a low-level manner, finding to-do lists and unfinished projects in his Gmail account and further organizing, working on, or deleting them" (22). "Paul's life is a form of work—doing drugs and talking to people is a form of literary production, since that activity, lightly transmuted, makes up the bulk of his fiction" (Schratz 235). Accordingly, he measures both his love life and his drug dependency against the background of his work. Though inspiring, the former at times affects him "cripplingly—to zero productivity;" the latter in turn maintains his work process (Lin, *Taipei* 52, 126–27). Unlike in Wallace's *The Pale King*, however, work is not a means to an end, it is an end in itself. Paul does not "work to get better" (Max, *Every* 215). He simply always works.

The convergence of life and work explains why vast quantities of *Taipei* are about activities that initially appear secondary to the act of writing. As an ambitious writer without institutional support, Paul promotes and sells his books, plans as well as funds his reading tours and stays with fans to save money. In Guy Standing's terminology, Paul "works for labor" by completing tasks that have no exchange value in themselves but are necessitated by the primary work of writing. Standing names "networking" or taking papers home to read over the weekend (in Schratz 234–35), but practically all of Paul's daily activities are suitable examples. *Taipei*'s representation of a writer's mundane daily life de-romanticizes conventional notions of creative labor and rings true not only because of Lin's sober style. Paul's restless hustle reflects the working conditions of contemporary writers, especially when the reign of austerity exacerbated their material conditions after the 2008 financial crisis. For although the crash was practical proof of neoliberalism's shortcomings, it only cemented the market logics of scarcity during the subsequent Great Recession (Crosthwaite 192).

In adherence to Ashton's claim that economic scarcity is one of Lin's guiding themes ("Poetry" 221–24), *Taipei* offers a distinct picture of what such scarcity entails for the arts when Paul and his friend Daniel sit "facing south at Bedford and North 1st with thirty to forty books on a rollout carpet" in a spontaneous attempt to improve Daniel's "'fucked' […] financial situation[.]" Though they generate some revenue, books are not the most popular commodity on offer. Within some hours, they "sold around $25 of books and $60 of Paul's Adderall, which he received monthly by mail at slightly-better-than-drug-dealer price from a graduate student at Boston College." A customer they befriend similarly buys "two books and three Adderall" (84–87). Predictably, prescription drugs are a more lucrative commodity than books, making Paul's initial suggestion to "shoplift things from Best Buy, or some other store, to sell on eBay" appear reasonable (82). By taking for free, Paul may take the entrepreneurial wisdom to buy low and sell high beyond the limits of private law, yet he merely imitates the logic of primitive accumulation within a consumerist context. Lin himself purportedly funded significant parts of his early writing career through this very method and published a novella on the topic (Anderson; Tietz; *Shoplifting*). Shoplifting is such a common "work for labor" for Paul that he at times does it without financial or indeed any purpose in mind. At one point, he reflects in hindsight that he must have been "on shoplifting autopilot: I wasn't thinking anything. I was just already doing it" (138).

Yet overall, *Taipei*'s interest in entrepreneurial mandates goes beyond a narrow focus on literal markets. Its accomplishment rather lies in the portrayal of the marketization of all spheres of life. On the character level the text depicts a collection of creative types who seek to stand out on the personality marketplace of New York's alternative arts scene, a task demanding creativity and initiative. Against this background, Paul and Laura do not only share a certain discomfort in social situations (see section 5.1), they also each have a well-curated internet presence serving as an antipode to their timid personalities in analog life. Paul constantly expands his network of fans, journalists and other writers within the sphere of alternative literature; Laura, an artist herself, has "a MySpace page, as an unsigned rapper, with six songs, including one whose music video, in which she rubs pizza on her face and feeds pizza to her cat, Paul remembered feeling highly amused and impressed by when he first saw it" (31). The dichotomy between outgoing and creative self-expressions in the digital sphere and considerable discomfort offline is sharp.

A different exchange, this one between Paul and Erin, brings out the thematic overlaps between computational communicative models and the striving for intimacy within *Taipei*. They spend Erin's birthday together when she receives a call from her "'on-and-off,' semi-vague relationship" (114). She answers in "a jarringly, briefly absurdly different voice—one of impatient, dominating aggression—than Paul […] had ever heard her use" which initially increases "his interest in her, knowing she was capable of what to Paul was her opposite." However, "at a moment when she had the opportunity […] to tactfully end the call and unambiguously convey she viewed their relationship as finished, Erin instead prolonged the call by speaking angrily, with sudden emotion indicating she wasn't indifferent." While she continues "in a manner like she'd forgotten his presence," "parts of" Paul are "earnestly, if dramatically, no longer viewing her as a romantic possibility" (116–17). But Erin reveals afterwards that she did not forget about Paul and had been accounting for him throughout:

> Erin somewhat abruptly ended the call and asked if it had been entertaining, or interesting, or at least not too boring.
> 'I was really interested.'
> 'It was okay? Not boring?'
> 'No. I felt high levels of interest.'
> 'Oh,' said Erin. 'Good.'
> 'I was surprised. You sounded angry.'
> 'Yeah,' said Erin. 'I was angry.'
> 'There was one part . . . when you started fighting more, instead of stopping, I felt, like, afraid,' said Paul, and Erin said she knew what part he was referencing and that she had specifically considered if he would be entertained, or not, and had felt uncertain. […] Paul realized with some confusion that he might have overreacted. (117)

Conventionally enough, Erin had Paul's "high levels of interest" in mind during the call. However, the manner in which Paul and Erin converse on this issue is of interest, for their exchange reveals a shared concern for self-regulation, a cybernetic rationality.

Bröckling aims to show that "[t]he entrepreneurial self is not merely a construct derived from theories of economics," but is put into practice by strategies and technologies that seek to mobilize and optimize people "not only within the economic sphere but in society in general" (xvi–ii). One technology he reviews is "360° Feedback," a personnel management method of all-round evaluation that factors surveys, audits and self-appraisal of employees, managers and customers into a "comprehensive evaluation system" of quality control. In this "democratic panopticon," "[t]hose being evaluated are under surveillance from all sides, but they are also evaluating the people evaluating them." This is the important difference to the original panopticon and Foucault's interpretation of it: While the disciplinary power in institutions such as Bentham's prison is exerted

unilaterally, that is to say top-down, "the feedback version of post-disciplinary control is closely linked to cybernetics" (159–61):

> the individual is a system for processing information, fluidly adapting her behaviour to the expectations of her environment that are indicated by regular inputs of bits of feedback. […] Feedback loops tell her when she is diverging from the norm while leaving it up to her to develop appropriate adaptive strategies (161).

In an important deviation from earlier disciplinary technologies, feedback therefore does not define stable norms to be met but constantly establishes them anew. Self-optimization here signifies a never-ending loop of evaluation and improvement.

Sociology has for decades linked such anxious self-reflexivity to the postwar rise of the service economy. The shift toward interpersonal skills that Mills describes in *White Collar* can escalate into Riesman's "radar," a conformist personality type constantly adapting to the demands of others (25, see section 2.3). *Taipei* leaves this logic fundamentally intact but accentuates the cybernetic dynamics underlying most of the social interactions it describes. Whereas *The Pale King* emphasizes the humanity even of those IRS workers with the most "tedious and dronelike" occupations (75), *Taipei*'s reliance on technological imagery portrays its characters as genuine "system[s] for processing information." Whether it is rain, which Paul understands to be "continuous and everywhere as an incognizable information," his own dreams or, most importantly, the behavior of people around him, his life amounts to the sum of information (13, 18–19, 162). Accordingly, his failures result from "an inability to process information creatively" (34).

The quoted passage about Erin's phone call brings out another of Lin's perspectives on (cybernetic) other-directedness: a detailed explication of what would usually be intersubjective subtleties and implications. Right after she hangs up, Erin explicitly asks for feedback, anxious to know "if it had been entertaining, or interesting, or at least not too boring […] 'It was okay? Not boring?'" Paul assures her of his "high levels of interest" and reports his surprise about her apparent anger. Erin confirms to have been "angry" indeed, yet not angry enough to forget about her appearance, she even indicates that the call's escalation was at least in part intended for Paul's enjoyment, she had "specifically considered if he would be entertained, or not." Typical for many characters' insecurity and need of approval within *Taipei*, Erin and Paul feel "uncertain" and "like, afraid" respectively. Only their mutual reassurances that Erin is "interesting" to Paul but also interested in him alleviate their anxieties. True to "[t]he commandment to 'know thyself' (as others

see you)" (Bröckling 163), the outside perspective reigns supreme for both. In a later exchange Erin asks Paul if he has "any critiques. Any. […] Or anything. Any thoughts" about their sex life. Their mutually reassuring feedback—"'seems fine' […] 'you're good at everything' […] 'and you keep it interesting'" (181)—constitutes their intimacy. Given that their story knows "no heroes, no quests, no romance, no adventure, and no triumph over obstacles" and is "only minimally emplotted" like the rest of *Taipei*, Paul and Erin's shared history amounts to the "the extreme form of realism" known to readers of self-help books on intimacy, that of the "case history" (Shumway 150).

In part also because both Paul and Erin are self-exposing writers, the ubiquitous yet voluntary (self-)surveillance is ever-present: How would a given action be perceived by others? When a hesitant Paul tries to hold Erin one night after she falls asleep, the outside perspective is central. He lies down next to her, "meekly paw[s] her forearm three times, then briefly [holds] some of her fingers" and eventually settles "stomach-down with his arm on her arm, thinking that if she woke, while he was asleep, this contact could be viewed as accidental" (130). Eager for intimacy but unsure about its permissibility, Paul keeps the outside perspective in mind (especially in case he falls asleep himself) and chooses an approach he could always defend as unintentional. In a turn of events that is representative in its disappointment of already modest prospects, Paul realizes "[a]fter a few motionless minutes" that he is "unable to sleep in his increasingly tense position" and ends up "facing a wall" instead (130).

Taipei's last pages further highlight the cybernetic dynamic between Paul and Erin when, after "working on things a few hours on Adderall," they take a dose of psilocybin mushrooms that in Paul's case is exceedingly high. Only their bodily intimacy grounds his hallucinations:

> His steady, controlled petting of one of Erin's vertebra with the cuticle of his right index finger gradually felt like his only method of remaining in concrete reality […] Paul began to discern his rhythmic petting as a continuous striving to elicit certain information from Erin by responding or not responding to her rhythms, in a cycle whose goal was to produce momentary equilibriums. He felt increasingly attuned to the speed and quality of her breathing and heart rate, until he felt able to instantly discern changes in her physiology, which in entirety began to seem like an inconstant unit of unique, irreducible information (an ever-changing display of only prime numbers) that was continuously expressed and that bypassed the parts of them that allowed for deliberation or perception or intuition, beginning and ending in the only place where they were exactly together, undifferentiated and unknowable, but couldn't, in their present form, ever reach, like a thing communicating directly with itself, rendering them both irrelevant. (243–44)

Paul's large dose explains why this passage's flourishing surpasses the already high level of abstract imagery throughout *Taipei.* Yet at its core, the quote describes two systems gradually

synchronizing by means of a feedback loop. By "striving to elicit certain information from Erin" through her "breathing and heart rate" (themselves self-regulating functions), Paul aims to reach "momentary equilibriums," his phrasing for the aporia of intimacy. Given Paul's positivistic perception and awareness about his inadequate understanding, the narrative evokes the sublime through a math problem. Erin's body is likened to "an inconstant unit of unique, irreducible information" and "an ever-changing display of only prime numbers" beyond Paul's grasp. True to cybernetics' relational design, Paul will never reach his "undifferentiated and unknowable" goal of being "exactly together" with Erin, his attempts are instead part of an infinite approximation. In this instance he remains committed to his efforts, however odd they may be, as there seems to be no alternative to seeking an impossible convergence. The narrative suggests that Paul's somewhat uncharacteristic dedication is caused by his large intake of mushrooms. He expects the worst and already deems himself "in the prolonged seconds before death" when Erin "meekly" informs him that he "can't overdose on mushrooms" (246). Though misconstrued, the near-death experience nevertheless has an effect. Whereas Paul was indifferent toward death before and even casually contemplated suicide (126, 213), he "is surprised when he hear[s] himself […] say that he [feels] 'grateful to be alive'" in the book's very last lines (248). Lin's fondness for levelling the difference between direct speech and ironically marked clichés makes for an ambiguous ending, but the passage helps to examine a third innovation Lin brings to conventional perspectives of cybernetic other-directedness: Paul's frequent perception of *himself as other*.

In numerous instances, Paul identifies himself as yet another "information system" in apparent autonomy. Not only does he read the faces around him as literal interfaces and processes their alternatively "bored," "depressed," "self-loathing," "serious," "glassy, disoriented," or "agitated" expressions (5, 8, 21, 25, 30, 31). Furthermore, he feels "himself trying to interpret the situation," hears "himself asking" questions, becomes "aware of himself analyzing" or "remembering" something and at times even waits "for himself, it seemed, to think or do something" (10, 12, 21, 52, 45). A different exchange with Erin conveys this sense of self-surveillance and lacking agency, once again through computational imagery:

> 'Paul,' said Erin, and grasped his forearm. They stopped walking. More aware of Erin's perspective, looking at his face (and not knowing what expression she saw or what he wanted to express), than of his own, Paul didn't know what to do, so went 'afk,' he felt, and remained there—away from the keyboard of the screen of his face—as Erin, looking at the inanimate object of his head, said 'if I did I would tell you' and, emphatically, 'I'm not lying to you right now' (106).

In a digital rendition of the Cartesian body-mind dichotomy, Paul's momentary withdrawal is likened to the absence of a user, his mind, from the device of his body. As a result, "the screen of his face" remains blank and his head, like a switched-off computer, resembles an "inanimate object." One of *Taipei*'s points of contention thus concerns the fact that the always busy creative entrepreneur Paul seems to lack agency and undertakes virtually all of his activities in an affectless state of indifference. In other words, Paul might act like an entrepreneur, but he neither thinks, speaks nor feels like one. The fact that Paul engages in feedback loops with himself exemplifies this discrepancy between action and thought (appearance and substance, form and content). This, in turn, evokes the notion of alienation which, due to both its centrality for *Taipei* and its complicated history, warrants contextualization.

5.4. Alienated (But How?)

Paul's life is full of contradictions. He is hyperconnected yet detached, constantly chatting but has "'absolutely nothing' to say" (7), always at work but seemingly indifferent toward both process and product. Though the text describes Paul respectively as "detached," "depressed" or "depleted" and mostly reserves the label "alienated" for his peers, his state certainly suggests alienation in a colloquial sense (34, 52, 160, 20). At the same time, the above contradictions trouble alienation's conventional understanding as a form of withdrawal. Lin's reviewers frequently diagnose alienation on both the sides of characters and readers, but the unclear analytical benefit emerges when one critic wonders what Paul and his friends are actually supposed to be alienated from (Lorentzen, "Tao"; Hugendick). The question is slightly misleading as Paul's contradictory state indicates that he is not alienated from anything. With Rahel Jaeggi's understanding of the term, his alienation can rather be explored as a deficiency in the *form* of his many relations.

Jaeggi aims to reconstruct the once widespread notion of alienation after it had come under conceptual criticism by postmodern philosophy. Virtually all modern understandings of alienation—from Rousseau to Hegel, Heidegger and Adorno—implied that somewhere beneath or before the alienating social relations, an unalienated, i.e. authentic subject was to be found. Axel Honneth summarizes this paradigm in his foreword to Jaeggi's book: "whatever is diagnosed as alienated must have become distanced from, and hence alien to, something that counts as the human being's true nature or essence" (vii). Poststructural charges against such essentialism led to a marked decline of interest in alienation. By way of a course correction whose pattern, after the

discussions of "sincerity," "authenticity" and "critique" (see chapter 2) has become familiar, Jaeggi deems such criticism to have overshot the mark. Alienation's discursive decline in late 20th century philosophy and cultural critique might be viewed as a plausible adjustment to its inflationary and pathos-laden use in, for example, postwar Marxism and existentialism. It furthermore reflects the mismatch between a subject-centered notion and postmodern philosophy's tendency to question the coherence of this subject in the first place. But however vague the concept's connections to subtle feelings of unease, estrangement and powerlessness are, Jaeggi considers it too important to dismiss entirely. The critical attention to alienation may have declined, but "the *problem* of alienation is still (or perhaps once again) of contemporary interest" (xix, original emphasis).

Indeed, the term itself might have lost its currency, but the problem it addresses never vanished from the critical conversation. As Fluck shows in an essay on "Narratives of Self-Alienation" in Theory discourses of the recent past, even icons of postmodern philosophy such as Butler implicitly operate with notions of alienation when theorizing the self (119–23). Jaeggi herself makes a convincing case for alienation's renewed urgency when highlighting how contemporary labor arrangements have incorporated the century old "alienation critique," an evident predecessor of the more recent "creative critique," so successfully that their universal demands can be mistaken for autonomy:

> [A]ren't the various demands on the flexibly creative modern 'labor-power entrepreneur,' for whom there no longer exists a boundary between work and leisure, a realization of the Marxist utopia of the 'all-sided development' of the human being who can 'fish in the morning, hunt in the afternoon, criticize in the evening'? (xx)

For Jaeggi, such an ambivalent cooptation illustrates both the "stubborn persistence" as well as the need for a renewed understanding of alienation (xx). After all, it was first and foremost Marx's understanding of alienation that grounded the philosophical concept in a political economy of labor relations under industrial capitalism (14–16; cf. Trebeß 91). Especially in his early work, Marx saw labor as an anthropological constant "conceived as a process of metabolic exchange with nature" and as central for the realization of both the subject and its environment: "The human being produces *herself* and *her world* in a single act" (Jaeggi et al. 14, original emphasis).

Yet under capitalism, this "metabolic exchange" of creating (externalizing) and receiving (appropriating) must remain deficient. Firstly, wage workers do not own what they produce: "In the object, the worker reifies his abilities, his powers, his spirit, his passion, he doubles himself in

the object, but loses the object, which confronts him as a mass of dead objects that do not belong to him but dominate him" (Trebeß 93, translation FE). Secondly, wage labor under capitalism has no intrinsic motivation but is a means of survival; it is guided by the demands of the market, not the worker's desires. This results in what for Marx is the central dimension of alienation: the worker's alienation from her labor and its product. But this notion of alienation is in need of an update. In addition to Marx's simplistic conceptualization of an unalienated primitive communism that preceded alienation under capitalism, his focus on industrial capitalism and the distinction between (mechanical) work and leisure guiding his thoughts, has become as untenable as the essentialist notion of the subject.

Jaeggi proposes to rethink alienation through a paradox, namely as "a *relation of relationlessness*." For her, "alienation does not indicate the absence of a relation but is itself a relation, if a deficient one. Conversely, overcoming alienation does not mean returning to an undifferentiated state of oneness with oneself and the world; it too is a relation: *a relation of appropriation*" (25, 1, emphases in original). Jaeggi accordingly shifts the attention away from what one is potentially alienated from to a characterization of how this relation might be deficient and thus hindering an appropriation of the world (1). She defines the latter as "a comprehensive conception of practical relations to self and world […] a broadly understood capacity of knowing and dealing with oneself: having access to or command over oneself and the world." This entails "the capacity to make the life one leads […] one's own […] to identify with one self and with what one does; in other words, as the ability to realize oneself in what one does. "Someone who appropriates something puts her individual mark on it, inserts her own ends and qualities into it[,]" which means that appropriation necessarily "means a transformation of both poles of the relation" (37–38). This reciprocity signifies a useful marker to identify processes of appropriation and evaluate their potentials.

Jaeggi's formal understanding of alienation eschews a number of theoretical pitfalls, such as the essentialism outlined above, a paternalistic view on what is supposed to be the good (unalienated) life as well as a teleological view on history that implies a quasi-automatic *Aufhebung* of the alienated condition sooner or later. Moreover, it ultimately helps to draw attention toward the disturbances in one's outlook on the world. Conversely, Jaeggi's middle ground approach comes with the burden of having to constantly defend her argument both against older forms of

social critique, e.g. in the Marxist tradition, that use "alienation" rather loosely and, on the other side, postmodern social constructivism (*Entfremdung* 311–34). Since the book's translation in 2014, her intervention has certainly contributed to a revival of literature on alienation in both German and anglophone discourses (Völz, "Alienation").

Within *Taipei*, Paul and many of his peers can certainly be said to have "relation[s] of *relationlessness*" both toward the world and themselves. Paul imagines "himself […] as the botched clone of himself," wonders if "part of himself […] had gotten lost on its way here" and felt "like a bored robot" as a child already (109, 119, 104). Erin likewise states that Paul ought "to return her, like a broken appliance to a store […] because she need[s] to be replaced with a newer, upgraded model" (105, 204). The imagery of (self-)reification as cognizant yet uninterested commodities bespeaks both *Taipei*'s gloomy posthumanist outlook as well as the severe degree of self-estrangement it displays. Though Paul is very much part of and busy within his world, his relationship to it remains indifferent. With Jaeggi, these narrativizations of alienation indicate "a characteristic impoverishment of the relation to self and world" (6). Because she agrees with Marx (and Arendt) that "self" and "world" are co-constitutive and that "alienation from oneself is inseparably bound up with alienation from the material and social world," alienation indicates a failed appropriation of the world through one's actions (xxi). In this view, Paul's state is the result of either an unwillingness or an inability to appropriate the world, though the narrative's by-now familiar indifference leaves this question of agency unaddressed.

However shrouded, the central method to appropriate the world within *Taipei* remains writing. As shown above, Paul's efforts in this regard are precarious and repeatedly fail. In more general terms, his cybernetic outlook on the world fosters his passive relation to it. He attentively registers the world as 'incoming information,' but never leaves this contemplative state to assume a more active role within it. If his self is constituted relationally between him and the world, this relation is marked by apathy. This relationlessness to the world is brought out in various ways and is illustrated well in Paul's effort to articulate some social insight on the streets of Taipei: "I don't like places…where everyone working is a minority…because I feel like there's too many different…I don't know […] Just that…here, when you see someone, you don't know…that…they live like two hours away and are um…poor, or whatever" (187, unmarked omissions in original). As Audrea Lim glumly observes: "Such is Paul's attempt at social commentary."

Taipei's narrative effects alienation in both temporal and spatial terms. Regarding the former, the text frequently evokes a sense of complete determination. Whether Paul conceives of the world as a computer simulation or a cosmic accident, in both scenarios the future is determined, there is no point in trying to affect it (12). Furthermore, he gradually loses his grasp on the past, a process attested by the many passages about how Paul "couldn't remember" certain events, exchanges or persons (23). He likens his memory loss to an "external hard drive that had been taken from him" and is now difficult to retrieve (75). *Taipei* appears to stand at an endpoint of Jameson's estimation that, in world dominated by pastiche and simulacra, "the past as 'referent' finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts" (*Postmodernism* 18). But *Taipei* does not participate in the flat gestures toward the past that Jameson sees at work in formally nostalgic films or postmodern historical novels. Even the single analeptic section of notable length focusing on Paul's childhood is, like the entire text, dominated by an inescapable present. In other words, the text does not (mis)represent the past through some retrospective distortion—it ignores it entirely. *Taipei*'s meticulous "timestamps" (Sturgeon) of how, to give one of many examples, Paul reads "a 2:12 a.m. email from Erin" "around 2:30 a.m.," instead bespeaks a hollow attempt at orientation in an everlasting present bereft of a coherent temporality. This absent sense of history bespeaks a subjectivity entirely at home in the world of Web 2.0 and social media specifically. For Liu, these environments "are all about the betwixt and between […] of the moment. *Now* is the order of the day. *Now* is history as it really *is*, with no *was* in view more extensive than—on a typical Web 2.0 screen—just a handful entries ordered by most-recent or 'trending' at top" (28, original emphasis). Paul never reflects on the possibility of a sense of history in the digital age (as Liu goes on to do) and remains in a flat yet eternal present-time.

In spatial terms, Paul's near-constant sense of confusion emerges in the endless variations of how he becomes "'completely lost[,]'" "couldn't find" his friends, or fails to recognize his home, although he stands in front of it (19, 6, 34). Suitably, *Taipei* is set virtually throughout in what Marc Augé calls "non-places." In opposition to conventional "places," these generic spaces of transit "are designed and intended for the frictionless passage of a nameless and faceless multitude" and lack historical and relational depth (Buchanan, "non-place"; cf. Koolhaas for "Junkspace"). "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé 77–78). Non-places bring about flat experiences and resist both identification and appropriation: "The

space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude" (Augé 103; cf. Jaeggi 330).

In one regard, the ubiquity of such non-places within *Taipei* points to the ongoing retreat of public spaces, as discernible on Paul's book tour. On nights between readings he drives "his rental car to a row of fast-food restaurants near the airport," sleeps "in a McDonald's parking lot," endures a "seven-hour layover" at another airport and eventually sleeps "on a mostly empty bus, dropping him off in Brooklyn's Chinatown, a place he'd forgotten existed" (109–10, 113, 114). That Paul had "forgotten" this *place* with its rich historical and identificatory implications, not least for him as the son of Taiwanese migrants, bespeaks both his hazy cognition as well as a habituation to non-places. Even his apartment—with its oft-mentioned "queen-size mattress" and "the low table" —is presented in such sterility as to conjure a non-place (18, 157). In its chilling description reminiscent of his living space, Paul's dream "about his cube-shaped room being a storage facility in which he'd been placed by an entity that believed in his resale value" rings true (53).

Comparable to Jaeggi's observation on the co-constitutionality of self and world, one implication of Augé's non-place is that a physical environment's solicitation or discouragement of appropriation—the basis for the very distinction between a "place" or "non-place"—depends to some degree on the initiative of the subject within it. Paul's default posture, "motionless between his blanket and mattress like some packaged thing" (52), denies such initiative, so that almost every space he inhabits diminishes into a non-place. This does not change even in the city of Taipei, although its sounds are "immediately and distinctively familiar" to him and Paul thinks of it "as a fifth season, or 'otherworld,' outside, or in equal contrast with, his increasingly familiar and self-consciously repetitive life in America" (164, 16). In Taipei, he spends his time in the same manner as in the United States, scrolling through the internet, conversing with Erin (who accompanies him) and aimlessly wandering the city on drugs without engaging with anyone except for matters of consumption. Erin and Paul are the busiest when they shoot a film on their laptop at one of the city's McDonalds (168).

Another characteristic of non-places, the replacement of human engagement with machines is evoked when Paul and Erin, "sitting on Paul's mattress […] wearing headphones and doing things on their MacBooks" prefer to converse on "Gmail chat" rather than in person about the quality of the "MDMA and Adderall" they have just taken (154–55). The text's register of passivity

and distance conveys the inertia of relationships between *Taipei*'s subjects and their surrounding world. Paul might "look at the internet," but he "stares" at the world. Sometimes he does not even come that far and instead "stare[s] at the backs of his eyelids with motionless eyeballs" (57, 62, 18). Similarly, Paul and his friends "ingest" rather than take drugs and, perhaps most telling in its forensic sterility, "perform oral sex on each other" (34, 238). In turn, Lin's syntax mirrors the sequential logic of *Taipei* as a text dominated by sameness. Paul's myriad observations are conveyed in long series of non-subordinating conjunctions which grammatically level whatever qualitative difference the described events would conventionally imply.

What does this understanding of alienation contribute to a reading of *Taipei*? For Jaeggi, "clarifying the various dimensions of alienation" enables a reflection about the opposite it makes impossible, namely a life lived in the limited autonomy of "being able to understand one's life as one's own[.]" Once alienation is recognized as a deficient relation, one can start thinking about "the conditions for being able to […] lead one's life freely" (36). Plainly, these conditions are absent within *Taipei*. What is present within it, however, is a subtle and oddly liberating sense about the lack of consequences of one's actions as an alienated subject in an alienating environment. Though missing both the pathos of nihilists and the wit of cynics, Paul and his friends intuit that their actions do not matter much anyway. This awareness plausibly explains how their indifference toward a world that in turn is indifferent toward them guides the entire text, and contextualizes a mumbled "whatever" to be a plausible attitude toward such an environment (56).

This apathy encompasses both banal discussions about where to eat or what to do, situations in which everyone "seem[s] committed to not deciding" (102), as well as more serious matters: After a "miscalculated" amount of heroin brings Paul close to a fatal overdose, he still responds to Erin's worries about his wellbeing with impatient sarcasm (238–39). On a different occasion, Paul deems the $89 it would cost to mail his drug supplies to Taiwan excessive and decides to smuggle them onto a plane. For him, a potential imprisonment would merely lead to increased productivity: In reference to "two very long novels," he jokes that in "jail I'll just write *Infinite Witz*." When imagining the scenario, he is "a little surprised at the ease and speed with which he felt he would accept it—and that he would be relieved, to be removed from the confusing, omnidirectional hierarchy of his life" (159). As the architectural actualization of a disciplinary apparatus, prison is envisioned as a soothing alternative to the confusing mandates of a post-disciplinary society.

The absence of self-discipline, an important skill in post-disciplinary societies, frequently occurs in pair with the lack of consequences mentioned above, as Kai van Eikels observes. In a modern society that perceives its citizens in functionally differentiated systems, e.g. in education, medicine or the job market, but never recognizes the whole person, such indifference toward minor transgressions is typical (164). For Lin's undisciplined subjects, this relationship of mutual indifference at times approximates Jaeggi's "relation of relationlessness." After Paul is caught shoplifting, he is questioned by a sheriff shaking "his head in strong, earnest, remarkably unjaded disappointment" and feels momentarily "ashamed[,]" but shoplifts again "a few hours later" (138). In other words, he acts as if nothing had happened—indeed no consequences are mentioned. The police officer who stops "Erin's five-seat car" carrying eight people, every one of whom is "illegally carrying drugs," likewise merely looks "at her twomonths-expired, out-of-state driver's license an abnormally long time" before "allowing her to continue driving, in what seemed to be an egregious oversight, without a ticket or decreasing passengers" (89–92). Not least in the United States, class and identity categories such as race or gender determine policing practices. In other words, many other (groups of) people would not encounter such amiability. But the incident nevertheless reveals a reflexive moment within the (post-)disciplinary control society. In van Eikels' summary:

> The history of civilization described by Norbert Elias, in which self-discipline primarily means affect control, becomes more complicated when the institutions and social structures in which the controls are objectified generate their own negligence. Instead of the uncontrolled Michael Kohlhaas or Themroc type, a new figure appears, whose anarchism remains immanent to domination. The only freedom this antihero knows is the relative lack of consequence in what he does and what he does not do. And this freedom has the only, but undeniable, virtue of being real (165, translation FE).

True to his immanence to domination and, as one might add with Jaeggi, his immanence to alienation, the antihero Paul uses these (minor) freedoms mindlessly and without ambitions of any kind. After all, his refusal to commit to anything—not even to the realization of being alienated—is the source of a paradoxical freedom. This signifies his failure in Jaeggi's understanding, for she contends that "indifference is not only an experience of powerlessness but also of power" because "the world is not significant in itself but only through me; things are not important of themselves; instead, I make them so by identifying with them." However, this realization once again

> becomes an instance of alienation when one fails to conclude from it that one must *give* the world meaning oneself—that is, when indifference turns into a sense that it is impossible to be involved in the world as a being that actively shapes it. In other words, the world becomes mine when I (actively) appropriate it for myself (150, original emphasis).

Although this passage focuses on the subjective level, Jaeggi also considers how specific forms of sociality foster alienation—and on how social criticism can contribute to a corresponding change (*Entfremdung* 325–27). In this regard, her insight into what alienation makes impossible and simultaneously points to by negation—an autonomous life—is of use for an understanding of *Taipei* and its idiosyncratic form. Although evidently alienated, the book's characters remain indifferent toward the idea of alienation. However, few readers remain indifferent toward the book's estranging aesthetic. Paul remains the same throughout, but the reader may use the text as the implicit indicator that Jaeggi has in mind. The concluding section therefore turns to the alienating reading experience that *Taipei* effects and how this experience can in turn provoke a reflection both about the world the book describes and the world it is published in.

5.5. An Indifferent Text

In a noteworthy conjunction, *Taipei* formally plays with the lack of consequences its content describes through the arbitrary evocation of literary genres. While the book lacks a plot to speak of, it nevertheless calls upon various literary templates which could potentially structure the book but fade as quickly as they arise. In addition to its disingenuous gesture toward autofiction, *Taipei* alludes to several genres without actually relating to them. Paul and Erin's relationship suggests anything from romantic tale to marriage plot, their Las Vegas trip linking Lin's drug-induced prose to that of Hunter S. Thompson. But as if standing in for the book's many other fragments lethargically pointing to road narrative or *Künstlerroman*, this reference turns out to be of limited use when Paul, incapacitated at his reading by a dose of psilocybin mushrooms desperately "keep[s] thinking 'Hunter S. Thompson'" in a struggle to give meaning to his experience before having to end the reading "after two minutes" (126).

The attempts of some reviewers to dissolve *Taipei*'s opacity through conventional ways of interpretation fall flat for similar reasons. In a lengthy essay on Lin's oeuvre, Frank Guan explores *Taipei* with a focus on psychological development and identity. He claims that Paul's childhood as an Asian American with no recognizable role models in the media, his dysfunctional family as well as bullying at school ultimately send "him into an endless mental tailspin" ("Nobody's"; cf. Gabbert). While this perspective is not wrong, it hardly reveals anything about the text. After all, the relevant childhood passages stand out as the only substantial flashback. In this eight-page retrospective, Paul soberly recounts being teased for appearing "so cool" set off his irreversible

feedback loop of self-consciousness, his juvenile fits of rage and the resulting fights with his overstrained mother (36–43). The latter follows Paul's online presence and expresses concern about him, which leads to emotional clashes that find equal representation within the book (113–14). *Taipei*'s documentary logic does not obscure anything and instead matter-of-factly reports the likely causes for Paul's state, begging the question whether their mere identification can bring about interpretive gain.

Moreover, such an individual scope risks overlooking the book's social insights. Although Paul's pronounced solipsism accounts for his severely limited perspective, his condition evidently is the rule rather than the exception among his friends. A similar logic applies to Paul's identity as a second-generation Asian American who feels neither at home in the United States nor in the titular capital of Taiwan where his "Mandarin [i]sn't fluent enough for conversations with strangers" (15). Paul is entangled in-between two unwelcoming cultures, but to think of this transcultural dilemma as the interpretive key starkly reduces *Taipei*'s idiosyncrasy. Lin himself curbs such interpretations when remarking that *Taipei* might "just as well have been called *MacBook Pro*" and, more generally, that he wants "ideally in my fiction to edit race and name in the same way I might move or delete a comma" (A. Lim; cf. Vizzini). In turn, such cautioning against standardized interpretation entails no endorsement of "postcritical" perspectives on the book. To the contrary, as the preceding sections show, a historicization of the book goes a long way in illuminating an at first glance confounding text.

Taipei's preoccupation with markets on the level of content is offset by a form that maintains a difference between artistic intention on the one hand and readerly desires on the other. As Ashton notes about Lin's early poetry, his work "insists on the difference between its form and the commodity form, on the artistic intention for that form as opposed to any of the myriad uses to which a consumer might put it" ("Labor" 227). In a similar sense, *Taipei* speaks to Brown's investigation into how works of art can still make claims of autonomy even when, according to Jameson's seminal assessment, "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally" (*Postmodernism* 4). For Brown, "the only way to demonstrate the autonomy of art from its commodity character is to catch it in the act—that is, plausibly to ascribe meaning to actual works, an ascription that is itself a claim that the work in question belongs to the institution of art" (*Autonomy* 25). Yet in the same way that Lin's writing produces "irrelevant or immaterial"

"individual and experiential effects" on the reader (Ashton, "Labor" 228), *Taipei*'s formal indifference impedes standard interpretations to plausibly "ascribe meaning to" it. In other words, the book retains an intrinsic aesthetic value by way of insisting that this very value is determined by itself, not the reader. This insight in turn opposes Crosthwaite's assessment that *Taipei* makes "an appeal to the text's future reception as the only meaningful determinant of its value" (189).

Appreciating *Taipei* as indifferent helps to explain the text's refusal to even consider if the state of Paul and his friends is problematic. While "pathological" describes it aptly, the text is entirely uninterested in curing its elusive "disease" (from Ancient Greek *páthos*). *Taipei* might painstakingly bring to a head a by now clichéd *Capital Realism* in which "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism" (Mark Fisher 2), but it pays no mind whatsoever to either scenario. This refusal extends to 'interpretive cures' that seek to at least identify the problem. *Taipei*'s rejection of readerly appropriation results in an alienating read that explains the book's polarized reception. In a dynamic doubtless intensified by the increased marketing budget of its publisher, the book's distinctly affectless style triggered much affect and received wide-ranging responses from many sources, most of which were anything but indifferent. In addition to positive and mixed reviews by readers who 'get' Lin (more on these below), many felt compelled to read and write about a book that ostensibly did not speak to them at all. The causes for frustration ranged from opposition to the book's amorality to incredulity about the fact that "someone who hates words" would write an entire book (Kiesling; cf. Baker). Another common sentiment is exasperation with an author who, when asked about what inspires him, can initially think of "nothing" and then explains that he "had to do something. […] The big part of it is probably money" (in Lau).

Taipei's strength ultimately lies in its poetological refusal to offer meaning, its consistent disregard for both traditional and more recent understandings of what literature could or should achieve. To the frustration of many and the delight of some, the book's poetics of indifference emerges from its programmatic disinclination to even reflect about whether it could teach anything, delight or move anyone (Lieske). Yet rather than playing to the postcritical fascination with readerly experience, its frustrates both lay and professional approaches to the book and alienates all kinds of readers. In contrast to the empirical world, however, this aesthetically invoked relation of relationlessness—manifest in a reader's sense of defamiliarization, ambivalence, aversion—

lends itself toward a thought-provoking impulse. Since Lin's writing is closely based on an experience recognizable to many readers, the book's denial of interpretive appropriation signifies its verisimilitude in portraying the empirical world's alienating tendencies. As one critic puts it, the "paradox is that *Taipei*'s failure of the imagination is so closely tied to its success in portraying the experience of contemporary culture. Such is the altered state of our dystopia" (A. Lim). This assessment in turn helps to illuminate the opposite pole of Lin's divided reception.

Much like Erin, with whom Paul bonds "over feeling alienated," a sizeable number of readers recognize this disposition; they identify with the text precisely because it resists appropriation. Despite the indifference in form and content, this inverted identificatory potential places Lin's writing among the New Sincerity. As described above, Paul comes closest to an epiphany by way of a too large dose of psilocybin mushrooms. Moments before he hears "himself say" that he is "'grateful to be alive[,]"' he experiences another lucid moment: "Lying on his back, on his mattress, he uncertainly thought he'd written books to tell people how to reach him, to describe the particular geography of the area of otherworld in which he'd been secluded" (247). True to *Taipei*'s style, Paul only thinks "uncertainly" about his outreach from this "area of otherworld." But Lin "still write[s] to feel less lonely" (in Plummer) and a poetic endeavor toward community is palpable. This effect prompts some to view Lin's art as "in a complicated sense sincere" (Konstantinou, "Autofiction") and *Taipei* to offer its readers "a kind of alienation beyond alienation, an ambiguous utopia that at least for a moment seems an antidote to the routine discharge of mediated sociality" (McGurl, *Everything* 222). Lin's book 'expresses nothing,' yet as other New Sincerity writing, it does so toward a particular reader in a particular place (Kelly, "New" 206).

The character of Paul remains paralyzed by his anxiety. His search for a counterpart, for intimacy with an understanding and trusting other inevitably fails. Not least because his solipsism leaves him incapable to undertake such serious engagement, even Erin remains a distorted mirror image of himself. But while Paul fails to recognize subjective difference, *Taipei*'s narrative is at least able to convey some of his complex feelings. Paul may remain unable himself to truly engage with someone else, but he can still be met by 'the other' in the form of the readers, at least some of whom know his state all too well. These readers succeed in "reading [*Taipei*] for recognition" precisely because the text does not offer any coherent sense of identity or purpose (Fluck,

"Reading"). The book's awkward "success in portraying the experience of contemporary culture" therefore creates intimacy effects for readers who appreciate a plainly acknowledged sense of despair and have no patience for suggestions for how to overcome it. This might be cold comfort, but it is comfort nevertheless: The anti-Bildungsroman *Taipei* strikes a chord with those readers intimately familiar with a lack of progress.

In conclusion, *Taipei*'s achievement as a piece of art needs to be distinguished not only from its characters, but also its author. Lin's oeuvre and interviews since *Taipei*'s publication indicate a "recovery" from both the depression dominating it as well as a turn form cybernetic to esoteric thought.[26] This shift of interest from technological to holistic sublimity might appear to suit Lin's peculiarity, but here he merely mimics the intellectual turns of many cyberneticians who discovered intriguing intersections between advanced mathematics' elegant complexity and the equally pleasing aesthetics of New Age thought half a century before him (R. J. Williams, "World"). Conversely, Lin's recent susceptibility to conspiracy theories is indicative both of such development's often dubious side-effects as well as his ongoing inability to think about sociality in critical and, one hopes, eventually emancipating terms.[27] *Leave Society*, the title of his latest autofiction yet again chronicling some years in the life of a thinly veiled Lin instead indicates the continuity of his determination to evade rather than reflect on society's contradictions (cf. Napier).

[26] Lin not only means his drug addiction, but in an escapist impulse thinks of his "recovery" in universal terms, as a recovery "from almost everything — my public education, my cultural consumption, pornography, the United States, corporations and their products and ads, pesticides and radioactive atoms and electromagnetic radiation and other environmental toxins, etc." (Burton; cf. Heti and Lin; Lin, *Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change*).

[27] See for example "My 9/11 History" in which Lin speculates in reference to a scientist "who'd lost her job […] due to her 9/11 research" that the "upper 90 percent of building seven, and parts of the other five WTC buildings had been turned into dust by a classified technology that interfered electromagnetic energy in a static field, somewhat like in a microwave." More recently, Lin advises against COVID-19 vaccinations based on, amongst other things, the misinformation by known conspiracist Robert F. Kennedy Jr (@tao_lin).

6. Collaboration for "Something Else" in Barbara Browning's *The Gift*

> For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, countergift, or debt. If the other *gives* me *back* or *owes* me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift
>
> Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*.

Toward the end of Barbara Browning's *The Gift (, Or Techniques of the Body)* of 2017, protagonist Barbara Andersen tells her friend about the novel she plans to write—the very book that turns into *The Gift*:

> I said I wanted to write a novel, and it was going to be about technique and art and love and surrogacy and gift economies and feminism and communism and the erotics of collaboration. I was making dances to silence and to words and to music, and I showed him a couple of those (187).

This curious list demonstrates *The Gift*'s medial, intertextual and intellectual promiscuity and is likewise suggestive of its metafictional proclivity to comment on itself, engrossing the reader through a sense of self-awareness effected through both parody and a rhetoric of transparency. The novel similarly engages autofiction, but unlike in *Taipei* where "promotion things" obscure the actual creative work of writing literature, the process of Barbara Andersen writing a novel dominates all of *The Gift*. The main character is the author's namesake and hardly disguised alter ego. Just like Browning, she is a tenured professor of performance studies at New York University, a novelist and an enthusiastic musical dilettante. The reader accompanies her in between family and academic matters, as well as her endeavors in the performance art world of the early 2010s. Divided into three barely plotted parts, the episodic narrative is reminiscent of a string of blog posts that see Andersen teaching courses, worrying about her ailing mother, watching performance art, moving among the wider spheres of Occupy Wall Street and entering an online relationship with a mysterious musician in Germany. Andersen's abstract dances performed by Browning are printed as black-and-white screen shots in the book and can be accessed online (just like her ukulele song covers, on which more below).

Given Andersen's widespread interests and a compulsion to mention every artist that plays a role in her life, *The Gift* discusses art ranging from avant-garde to commercial mainstream. The novel contains poetry, describes dance and performance art in elaborate ekphrasis, references over

sixty songs (E. Lim) and code switches to quote from Brazilian music. At other times, it merely gossips about the celebrities of Andersen's world at the intersection of art, academia and activism. Lauren Berlant, who Andersen "sometimes refer[s] to […] as 'the smartest woman in the United States of America'" and "the anarchist anthropologist David Graeber" have not only each already "made a cameo appearance in [Andersen's] last novel" but also appear within *The Gift* (82, 32, 212). Andersen's often nude dances evoke the work of performance artist Karen Finley, who in turn is not only a colleague at NYU but also an "unequivocally and passionately" loved friend of hers (95). As part of what Browning calls her "conceptual art project of blurb procurement[,]" her obvious literary inspiration Chris Kraus as well as Fred Moten, another NYU colleague, not only appear within *The Gift* but also praise it on its back cover (Browning, "Weird"; 35, 127).

True to the hyperreferential style of Andersen's "obscure little postmodern novel[s]" (35), both title and subtitle are themselves quotations of the book's main intertexts. *The Gift* points to the homonymous titles by Marcel Mauss (in its English translation) and Lewis Hyde, the latter itself a mediation of the former. The subtitle in turn replicates Mauss's essay "Techniques of the Body." "It was meant to be funny, the title," Andersen explains in one of many metafictional sleights of hand, "because it's been regifted so many times. Seriously, type in 'The Gift' on the Amazon Books page. You won't believe how many people have used that title" (172). It is this tension between Andersen's utopian belief in gift economies and today's consolidated capitalist marketplace (where there is no such thing as a free lunch) epitomized by Amazon that *The Gift* explores.

Andersen expresses her enthusiasm for gift economies through an unusual understanding of intimacy, and specifically her habit of sending "inappropriately intimate" ukulele song covers to both friends and strangers (6):

> it occurred to me that maybe if I began (or, to be honest, continued) super-producing both asked-for and unaskedfor recordings of my uke covers as gifts, I could possibly help jump-start a creative gift economy that would spill over into the larger world of exchange. The recent implosion of the global financial system made it evident that we needed to try something else. My idea may not have been particularly revolutionary, but I thought it might be a start (5).

The Gift takes neither Andersen's quest nor itself as a text all that seriously. While Andersen explicitly places her idea in the context of the 2008 financial crisis and the following upheavals, such as Occupy Wall Street, her ambition to "try something else" remains vague throughout. This

either quixotic, utopian or just naïve proposal nevertheless is *The Gift*'s closest approximation of an auto-poetic statement, especially once it is read in conjunction with its epigraph, taken from queer theory scholar José Esteban Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*. In his appropriation of Ernst Bloch's work on utopia, Muñoz dictates that "we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds" (1; qtd. in *The Gift* v). Muñoz was a friend and colleague of Browning's at New York University; he has a cameo in her *I'm Trying to Reach You*, and *Cruising Utopia* conversely mentions her in the acknowledgments (xix).

After his death in 2013, Browning published several vignettes in his memory and, as the editors of *Cruising Utopia*'s tenth anniversary edition note, she also "issued a call for people to inscribe" the very passage serving as *The Gift*'s epigraph "in a paradigmatic location of queer cruising, the bathroom stall" (xiii). As this chapter illustrates, Browning's text seeks to follow her friend's instruction to first "dream" and then "enact new and better pleasures" quite closely. Andersen might think of her quirky hobby as not "particularly revolutionary," yet by "reject[ing] a market model of self-interest" she explores a genuine change of social relations (33–34). Andersen takes the idea of wishful thinking seriously and, as she writes to her mysterious online relation Sami, "often things i imagine end up coming true" (23). Although her hope in the transformative power of a "creative gift economy" is substantiated with the help of various thinkers on the subject, the novel has no interest in developing what such a system would actually look like and explores this question playfully instead. Moreover, by cajoling the reader into "the erotics of collaboration" (187), the text indeed seeks to formally "enact" the dynamics it "dreams" up.

Section one of this chapter shows how Browning links "inappropriate intimacy" to gift exchanges and how various characters evoke different dimensions of gift giving and artistic giftedness (section 6.1). An excursus contextualizes *The Gift* as a "ficto-critical" novel (section 6.2). The subsequent sections then interrogate the reader's role in *The Gift*'s vision of a gift economy (section 6.3) and how the book's own paratexts bring out its conceptional blind spots about the "gifts" that make possible both Andersen's lifestyle as well as Browning's niche literature (section 6.4).

6.1. The Gift of "Inappropriate Intimacy"

Told first-person through the zany and oversharing Andersen, *The Gift*'s style ranges from charming and touching to goofy, cringeworthy and downright irritating. At least in part, this is

because it not only discusses and theorizes, but also performs its interest in "inappropriate intimacy." Within the book, the notion refers to unplanned encounters among (most often) strangers who are suddenly part of an unexpected yet intimate exchange. In such situations Andersen does not turn away in embarrassment but explores the possibilities of such happy accidents. Whether via spam emails or in the comment section of websites, during performance art pieces or in academic panels: whenever she perceives an opportunity to engage in "amorous relationships" (6), she takes it. Exposure feels liberating to her: "Somehow showing my flaws makes me feel less exposed than if I were to cover them. A very plausible reading of all this is just plain exhibitionism. I wouldn't dispute it, though I kind of prefer the term shamelessness" (68). Andersen perceives such shamelessness to come with great potential and, although *The Gift* has no sex scenes, it revolves around (queer) sexuality and "dirty mind[s]" virtually throughout (48). She corroborates her view with the help of Hyde, Graeber and Mauss; one important "technique of the body" is sex, after all.

Andersen primarily draws her optimistic understanding of "gift communities" as viable counterpoints to the capitalistic marketplace from Hyde's influential *The Gift* of 1983. Hyde examines gift economies of non- or pre-capitalist societies—to be found in ethnographies and fairy tales—to argue that gifts can counter the capitalist tendency of social estrangement. Whereas economic transactions tend to be instrumental and anonymous, "a gift makes a connection" (58). It establishes affective bonds, "emotional ties between the parties in the exchange" and can thus "produce and maintain a coherent community" much better than the marketplace (68, 82–83). Additionally, the gift can significantly enrich such communities: "In the world of gift […] you not only can have your cake and eat it too, you can't have your cake *unless* you eat it. Gift exchange and erotic life are connected in this regard […] Scarcity and abundance have as much to do with the form of exchange as with how much material wealth is at hand" (22, original emphasis). Andersen quotes this central passage, then adds: "that's the link between the redistribution of wealth and eros. To [Hyde], and to me, the beauty of the gift is that, like sex, it confounds our sense of what it means to give pleasure and to receive it. The more you give, the more you have" (6–7).

With Hyde, Andersen views art as specifically suitable to initiate such liberating dynamics of (erotic) abundance. She also cites Graeber's "tendentious" reading of Mauss and claims against most critics on the subject that a gift neither demands reciprocity nor creates debt:

> I have no difficulty accepting any kind of gift. The gifts that delight me most are art, especially music. Gifts never make me feel obligated, though they often make me feel inspired, so I make something in response but never out of a sense of debt. I'm a communist and a feminist. I'm kind of making fun of myself when I say that but not really. That's what those things mean to me—to enjoy giving pleasure because it gives me pleasure, never out of debt or obligation. This is also how I feel about sex (181).

The wide-ranging discourse on the history and theory of gift exchange presents numerous complications to this exceedingly cheerful view. First, despite Andersen's self-assurance, she might not control the interaction as much as she alleges. Rather, the agency of gift exchange lies not with the people involved, but within the gift itself. As Haselstein summarizes Mauss' observation, the gift that sets in motion the cycle of exchange is not subject to a sovereign giver but itself enforces its transfer and reciprocation. The involved individuals are the gift's effects, not its origin (165–66; cf. Mauss 31–33).

Andersen hence cannot determine what debt her gift exchanges effect—and such (immaterial) debt is unavoidable, as Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida highlight. Bourdieu reads the gift as an attempt to obligate and eventually subjugate the other, an intention simultaneously exposed and thwarted by the very act of reciprocation (Haselstein 167). Derrida in turn emphasizes that "*the gift as gift* ought *not appear as gift: either to the donee or to the donor*. It cannot be gift as gift except by not being present as gift" (Derrida 14, original emphasis). After all, in the moment of its exchange, the gift is always transferred into a symbolic equivalent of deposit or debt. This is the gift's Derridean aporia: as soon as it is accepted, it no longer is a gift—and, as such, confirms the economic fundament of gift exchanges. Whoever feels compelled to return a gift finds themselves to be subjected to the rule of reciprocity and cannot help but adhere to an economic logic of calculation, even if they end up violating this very law (Haselstein 169; cf. Brandes). Although Andersen is clearly aware of such debates, she never engages with them in earnest. Instead, she "gets by largely on [her] charms" (67) and never claims to offer theoretically sound propositions. Given that personal impulses, attachments and selective readings are an integral part of her utopian impulse, Andersen can truly be called a postcritic.[28] In addition, her conscious

[28] A second complication of Andersen's optimism about "inappropriately intimate" gifts concerns the question of consent. Set in the early 2010s but published in 2017, *The Gift* stays eerily silent about the considerable awareness that campaigns against sexual violence such as #MeToo have meanwhile brought to the topic of unsolicited intimacy. As will be shown in the following, the joyful manner in which Andersen forces her body onto others can justifiably be perceived as plain harassment.

employment of blissful naivety reveals that she too follows in the tracks of Wallace and his call to "endorse single-entendre values" (see section 3.1).

However, Andersen's relationship with Sami, a talented and enigmatic musician in Germany, soon reveals to her the risks inherent in her excessive optimism. The two make each other's acquaintance online: While she is "slogging through the blogs and vlogs of weirdos on four strings," that is to say other "ukulele enthusiast[s]," Andersen stumbles upon a piece by Sami of "extraordinary clarity, speed, and precision, and yet also exquisite sensitivity in the moments of pause and suspension. […] his harmonics were ethereal, otherworldly" (14–16). Following the just described logic of art as gift exchange, this epiphany inspires Andersen to give back. Soon after she contacts Sami with a request to choreograph a dance to his piece, a creative exchange unfurls. She dances to his music and voice messages, he composes music for her, once even "an entire jazz suite, each section titled after a small detail" of one of her novels "in a twenty-four-hour frenzy" (55). Andersen is thrilled that their "relationship feels like a collaboration" (67), but Sami remains uneasy about the very intersubjective intensities this entails. He calls himself "autistic," suffers from various anxieties and traumas, finds "emotions confusing" and sends her "mostly phatic" voice messages—in some of which narcoleptic Sami just breathes or snores (24, 23, 69, 78). In contrast, she declares her love for him and even masturbates to his music—although she bashfully admits that she "really can't show" the reader these "hand dance[s]" of her "own duet with" his music (80, 160, 117, 213).

Sami is insecure about their relationship, not averse to it, and Andersen at least momentarily reflects about what it means "to keep pushing all this intimacy on somebody who'd announced that he had severe social phobia" (129). Yet ultimately, she overburdens him with her transgressive proclivities. In contrast to her self-assured shamelessness, he is reluctant to reveal anything about himself, a reticence brought to a head when Andersen talks him into meeting her. Once she arrives in his hometown of Cologne, the panic-stricken Sami begs her not to come to his house, even threatens to commit suicide. But Andersen can sometimes be "a little obstinate" and insists (162), only to find out he gave her a wrong address. Distraught, she heads back to the airport where she is reminded at security that "gift" has homophones with contrasting meanings:

> in German, *Gift* is poison […] it was so devastating to think that my gifts, maybe even the beautiful ones, maybe even this novel, might be also poisonous for him, and maybe his gift was also poisonous for me […] the Germans were trying to tell me the dangerous thing was the gift itself (172, original emphasis).

Alexandra Lawrie reads Andersen's failure as a direct result of her naïve understanding of gift exchanges. Because she either ignores or even abuses the subtle power dynamics inherent in her relationship with Sami, her trip to Germany amounts to "a disproportionate act of generosity which diminishes Sami's standing, leaving him weakened and upset—unable to return the favor, he has become the lesser partner in the relationship" (Lawrie 9). Only in the digital and disembodied sphere can Sami, who has an amputated leg and is "often frightened" by "physical objects" (*The Gift* 17, 179), remain an equal partner. This parity is threatened once Andersen flies in with her "ridiculous bag of treats" (165). Her oblique admission that she has "probably overdone it with the treats, oops" chimes with her dismissive view of Sami's fear "of feeling indebted" as "irrational" (159, 180). Her biggest worry is that, if he "turn[s] out to be fictional" indeed, that would be "so predictable" and bad for the novel she has "been working so hard on" (169, 228).

Their long-distance intimacy continues after her return and, contrary to some critics' attempts to determine a fixed meaning (Sieben 199), it remains unclear until the end whether Andersen has "obviously been the impossibly cruel one to think only of [her] novel, never mind having over-loaded such a sensitive person with all that intimacy" or, conversely, if Sami might "have been lying about everything, in which case [Andersen] was a ridiculous dupe" (180–81). However, what becomes clear is that, rather than truly engaging with some alterity, Andersen has collaborated mostly with her own fantasy. Her friend Abner, a stand-in for a suspicious reader, presents a third possibility when he offers "the bleakest possible evaluation of [her] story" by suggesting that Andersen might be psychotic (193). He also worries if she is "pathologically representing [her] fictional narrative to him, Abner, as the truth just so [she] could play it all out in the writing of [her] novel." Eventually, however, even he decides to "to believe in" her (232).

Her financially comfortable life plausibly explains Andersen's disregard for the economic underpinning of her relationship with Sami. As a tenured professor, she can afford to have a "relationship to money" that is "a little mystical" (138–39): she is happy to publish her creative writing for free, an honorarium for her academic work is "the least of [her] concerns" and $500 for an art performance "would be pretty steep, though to [her] mind, worth it" (100, 82, 10). Most tellingly, she "can often recuperate what might appear to be wasted time by thinking of it as conceptual art" (99).

Conscientious Andersen might adhere to the "baseline communism" that her idol Graeber outlines as a commitment to mutual aid (Graeber) and offers money and support to friends in need (139). But as the Cologne trip illustrates, she remains unable to empathize with her beneficiaries and the debt she bestows on them. When she presents her "optimistic reading of gifts and the notion that wealth itself might have some agency and want to move itself around" in a seminar at Occupy's "Free University," one of her students replies "astutely, that this was interesting but risky, because the logic could also be invoked in defense of the so-called free market. True. That's a problem" (191). The fact that Andersen never again touches upon the awkward parallels between her utopian notion and the market radicalism she supposedly wants to overcome is indicative both of her selective perspective on gift theory as well as her unwillingness to think about her own class position (cf. Lawrie 2).

The book's social environment amounts to what Richard Florida coined "the creative class," a milieu of creative types closely associated with—and benefiting from—neoliberal policies of urban renewal. Those characters of *The Gift* who are not artists, academics or at least university educated cosmopolitans are a literal handful, and this includes Andersen's sister and mother. Indeed, the text evokes the cliché of a cultural elite detached from the kind of social antagonism and material problems, such as debt or housing, which sparked Occupy Wall Street in the first place. Andersen's unconcern about basic needs as well as her at times child-like view of the world are both exemplified when hurricane Sandy hits New York City in late 2012. The "optimist" Andersen first dances on her balcony "to the wind and the rain" and, once the storm knocks out the electricity, records "a uke cover of 'Stormy Monday' by candlelight on battery power" (104). To lighten up the "depressing" week that follows, she visits friends with whom she dances "to 'She's a Bad Mama Jama'" and forgets "for a little while about the mess the storm had made" (105–06).

Whereas the storm does not cause Andersen much worry, one of the passages receiving the most dramatic emphasis concerns a case of "pronoun slippage" when she drunkenly "misgender[s]" her trans friend Tye as "she." Andersen stammers, stops, backtracks and tries again, "but the *her* hung in the air like some gaseous abomination I'd just released […] I thought I might throw up" (64–65, original emphasis). Contrasted side by side, such passages appear to parody the sensibilities of woke university circles, and this certainly fits *The Gift*'s partial alignment with the satirical genre of the campus novel. Through its prominent self-parody, the novel marks itself as

consciously symptomatic of an academic liberal elite ignorant of the conditions outside its relatively wealthy circles. Yet despite its pronounced playfulness, the novel ultimately insists on its sincerity, and this includes Andersen's revealing self-portrait.[29] Unlike *Taipei*, *The Gift* thus corroborates the critique of autofiction as a naval-gazing genre by and for university types, "a symptom of higher education's self-justifying aspirations […] becoming increasingly detached from the material reality of its students and workers" (Murray).

Conversely, *The Gift* can also be read as a novel of ideas, a fittingly "vague category of fiction in which conversation, intellectual discussion and debate predominate" over plot and narrative (Cuddon et al. 481). As such, the novel contrasts Andersen's starry-eyed search for the 'right dosage' of intimacy for social change with the levelheadedness of the very Tye mentioned above, whose performance art displays considerable economic savvy. His interest "in the kinds of economic transactions that make art possible or impossible" results in performances—relayed through Andersen's ekphrasis—that circle around questions of manual labor, money and debt (113). His work contains "moment[s] of transparency" in which Tye goes "over the economic terms" of his art by listing the incomes and expenditures of the very piece being performed.

Tye is supported by reputable art institutions, but their stipends confer more symbolic than actual capital. Since he "likes to build fairly elaborate structures, and that's expensive[,]" and because he also often pays assistants, many of his pieces actually leave him several hundred dollars "in the hole" (10, 30). In addition, he is "paying through the nose for the [MFA] program" at Columbia which, according to his breakdown, costs "$28.57" per hour of instruction (49). Tye works several jobs simultaneously at restaurants, in care and sex work to pay for it (111). In one performance, he effectively likens his art to just another form of prostitution when he first chooses an assistant from the audience for a construction job and, once that is done, "help[s] the guy unzip his trousers and remove his belt, and proceed[s] to give him a hand job." While the performance is

[29] Browning's intellectual environment at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts suggests that the degree of satirical exaggeration is smaller than readers unfamiliar with this milieu might expect. During the early days of the COVID pandemic in 2020, students at Tisch demanded a refund of their tuition fees—about $30.000 per term—since in-person instruction was cancelled entirely. In addition to the rejection of this request, Tisch's dean Allyson Green sent a video of herself dancing in front of her laptop in an apparent attempt to cheer up her students (Asmelash). The episode encapsulates the earnest faith in the power of creative expression combined with an astonishing tone-deafness for the social reality of those without the means to freely dedicate their lives to the former, a combination that may persist among tenured academics at elite art schools in the United States.

ongoing, he collects "two hundred dollars for the hand job" but pays the spectator-turned-assistant "a fifty-dollar performance fee" in return (112–13).

Lawrie observes that, in addition to serving as a counterbalance to the blithe Andersen, Tye's character touches upon a second question for Hyde, who understands the ability to create art, or "artistic giftedness," as a gift itself which is meant to be shared further. Yet how, "if art is essentially a gift, is the artist to survive in a society dominated by the market?" (L. Hyde 278; qtd. in Lawrie 13). Tye interrogates the always compromised position by anyone who cannot fund their art through private means by making the question of his economic survival an integral aspect of his art. However, Lawrie is mistaken to put him "in the same category" as the Occupy Wall Street protestors "stymied both by the commodification of higher education […] and by the collapse of the job market following the crash" (14). Artists are part of a "winner-take-all" (or at least winner-take-most) economy in which years of poverty may be followed by a breakthrough that generously rewards this period of hardship (Zorloni and Ardizzone). Tye's development is a point in case. He needs money for most of the book, but refuses Andersen's offers of support, presumably because he understands the implications of debt discussed above. Eventually, he is able to convert the symbolic capital of his "fairly high-profile performances" and stipends into a well-paid show at the Whitney Biennial (203).[30]

Whereas Tye and Andersen embody their respective economic understandings as characters, Hyde and other theoreticians on gift exchange are similarly presented as personal interlocutors that figure importantly from *The Gift*'s very beginning. Andersen rereads Hyde for her "graduate seminar […] on theories of the fetish. Mauss's essay had long preoccupied" her, and "shortly after they'd shut down" Occupy Wall Street's camp at Zuccotti Park, she meets Graeber (4, 35). She herself offers two seminars at Occupy's "Free University" and is in turn invited by Berlant to give a workshop in Chicago. On all three occasions, the subject is "inappropriate intimacy" (96, 191–92, 125). Later Andersen receives an email by one of Berlant's student who is interested in "digitally mediated intimacies" and wants to write "her senior thesis on [Andersen's] novels" (221). Filmmaker Rebecca Miller, a friend of Browning and herself a minor character in

[30] Yve Laris Cohen, the artist Tye is based on, confirms this logic of payoff in a comment on a later grant: "I had thought that precarity was necessary and generative for my work, but I learned that I had been trapped in the limiting logics of scarcity. It felt so good to come to understand that my work can flourish with support" (Foundation for Contemporary Arts).

The Gift, puts it well when she states that Browning does not discuss theory in abstract terms, but "sensualize[s]" it (R. Miller). Browning herself calls this hybrid writing practice "fictocriticism," a term in want of contextualization.

6.2. Fictocriticism & Autotheory

Browning employs both "lyricism and personal narrative to push her critique forward" in her academic writing and reviewers have indeed complimented her scholarship for exhibiting "the imagination of a novelist" ("Barbara"; Erdman 77). As has become evident, this unorthodox blend carries on in her fiction, all of which is rife with references to theory, politics, art and her personal life ("Performative" 55–56).[31] Browning herself comments on her genre-bending triangulation of scholarship, memoir and novel form tongue-in-cheek: "I write works of fiction and cultural theory. Sometimes I like to confuse people about which is which" ("There").

Helen Flavell traces the neologism "fictocriticism" back to the Canadian cultural theorist Jeanne Randolph who coined it in the late 1980s to designate experimental writing in the cleavage between subjective, self-consciously aestheticized criticism on the one side, and fiction that engages with, probes and at times challenges critical theory on the other (193–203). Fictocriticism is "usually playful in tone and experimental in attitude" and seeks to "confound, and thereby problematise, the generic distinctions between fiction and criticism, between fiction and non-fiction, between philosophy and literature" (Haas 7). As the emphasis on play, experiment and the destabilization of "generic distinctions" indicates, poststructuralism is fictocriticism's most important inspiration. Suitably, Rosalind Krauss and Derrida are oft-cited inspirations. The former once wrote:

> If one of the tenets of modernist literature had been the creation of a work that would force reflection on the conditions of its own construction, that would insist on reading as a much more consciously *critical* act, then it is not surprising that the medium of a *post*modernist literature should be the critical text wrought in a paraliterary form (40, original emphasis)

[31] Among Browning's monographs are an ethnographic study on the Afro-Brazilian dance *Samba*, reflections on the metaphors of contagion used to discuss African culture (*Infectious Rhythm*), a volume on the Brazilian musician *Caetano Veloso* and a co-authored book on an obscure French singer (*Who the hell is Imre Lodbrog?*). Her first hybrid work of fiction, *Who Is Mr. Waxman?*, is an audio novel recorded by Browning herself and, true to her thematic interest in intimacy, "read, intentionally, a bit too close to the mike" (Gregory). It was followed by the books *The Correspondence Artist* and *I'm Trying to Reach You*.

In an interview, Derrida conversely voices unease about "a rigorous distinction between 'literature' and 'literary criticism'" and demands "to determine or delimit another space where we justify relevant distinctions" between them, but confesses that he does not "know what name to give it" (in Attridge 52). Yet as Stephen Muecke indicates, naming ought not to be a priority: "The name we would have given him [Derrida] was fictocriticism, but we went on anyway to write, and perform, critically, and sometimes fictionally, for instance by telling stories while making his philosophical arguments" (108).

Feminist discourse signifies fictocriticism's second important influence. As Jane Gallop summarizes, the meeting of American feminism and French poststructuralism of the 1970s paved the "passage between theory and life story" (5). Flavell emphasizes that some feminist discourses were in fact fictocritical long before the term's inception, having emphasized for decades the importance of ethics and personal involvement in scholarship. A similar observation can be made about anthropology (Browning, "Performative" 55). In this perspective, the interrogation and "interruption" of canonical texts by poststructural feminist Luce Irigaray is a "fictocritical method" (Gibbs, "Fictocriticism"). Irigaray's rereading of a text by, for instance, Freud "undo[es] it from the inside, interrupting it not only with comments and asides, but above all with questions." These questions then serve as the basis for "an interrogative mode of writing" that seeks "to open up spaces of debate rather than to close them down with assertions" ("Fictocriticism").

In other words, fictocriticism is skeptical about correct answers, and seeks to pose productive questions instead. Among the disciplines that have lent themselves to exploring the productive contradiction between personal involvement and critical detachment are ethnography, psychoanalysis, autobiography and anthropology—Michael Taussig might be the most prominent "fictocritic." Gibbs points out that this is likely because these disciplines "require a kind of research and reflection intimately involved with the voices of others" ("Fictocriticism"). As such, fictocriticism's interest in affect and subjectivism evidently chimes with postcritique's calls for methodological innovation through an emphasis on affect (Anker and Felski; cf. Chaouli et al., *Poetic*).

Fictocriticism, much like its apparent successor "autotheory" (more on that below), resists "the peremptory dictation of the institutional superego or the policing of the academic discipline" and opens intellectual avenues for anyone not conforming to the institution's implied preference

for the detached (white, male, heteronormative) critic (Gibbs, "Fictocriticism"). Knowledge is here understood as an embodied experience that defies the presumed masculinist bias of the body/mind dichotomy and whose sources range from the extraordinary to the banal. Like postcritique, fictocriticism is therefore best understood as a critique of academic knowledge production, an intervention that demands more institutional space for subjectivity. As a manifestly vulnerable medium, the body encapsulates this opposition to critique's supposedly detached and cool attitude. By pushing her body onto the readers in so many ways, Browning/Andersen performs this very intervention. From this perspective, *The Gift*'s "inappropriately intimate" adventures reveal insights that would remain obscure to more conventional (and more distanced) forms of knowledge production. In Sarah Ahmed's words, "theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin" (*Living* 10).

Canada, where the term emerged, and Australia, where it has been institutionalized in creative writing programs, are home to most fictocritical texts (e.g. Kalbfleisch; Dvořák; Robb; cf. Crane 1106–10). For the fact that the term is in use for some decades now, however, its lack of clarity even for those who practice or study it is notable. For Gibbs, "fictocriticism was never a genre that was One. And still isn't. Not so much a genre as an accident, even a hit and run—or perhaps precisely a hit and run guerilla action, tactical rather than strategic" ("Bodies"). The uncertainty already begins with the signifier: Some hyphenate the term (Flavell), others do not (Gibbs; Muecke), still others introduce different spellings to mark distinct understandings (Haas). This chapter's interest lies on the productivity that can emerge from this very indeterminacy. Before turning to this aspect, however, it is worthwhile to briefly highlight that the concept has problems beyond competing understandings and terminological quibbles.

Firstly, the term's implied claim to innovation in "the ancient quarrel of poetry and philosophy" going back to at least Plato's *Republic* remains questionable (Webb and Brien 187). Despite its plausible roots in poststructural theory and expression in postmodernist writing, one wonders whether the (in)distinction between criticism and literature was not already exhausted by the likes of Friedrich Schlegel or Benjamin, the latter a frequent inspiration for fictocriticism (Chaouli et al., "What"; Taussig, "I'd"). A plausible explanation for fictocriticism's emergence might conversely lie in the recent "'carrot and stick' approach to research management" within universities under financial pressure. Whereas "the booming science-oriented universities of the

Cold War" (McGurl, *Program* 4) appointed academically inclined artists "to their university positions because of their art form expertise rather than their academic background" (Webb and Brien 188), the ongoing austerity necessitates that these artists have something to show for their funding. To maintain their legitimacy—"carrot"—and avoid the "stick" of funding cuts, "writer-academics have […] begun to investigate their practice and analyse the ways in which their art form can also constitute a research methodology and generate reportable outputs" (188). Historicized as a creative form of knowledge production whose unorthodoxy and flexibility prove it worthy of funding within *The Culture of the New Capitalism* (Sennett), the 'brand' of fictocriticism indicates a rhetoric of innovation rather than genuine originality.

A second problem derives from fictocriticism's pronounced fascination with the blurry boundaries between fact and fiction and the implied idea of panfictionality, which can run counter to its ethical commitments. For despite the different understandings among fictocriticism's practitioners explored above, they share a liberal vision of good intentions, friendly play rather than actual antagonism when engaging with the indeterminacy of fiction and criticism. Yet the recently increased awareness for conspiracy theories and concerted propaganda has made clear (though not for the first time) that such ambiguity is equally useful for not-so-liberal purposes. In parallel to the discussion of various terms interrogated by poststructuralism—sincerity, authenticity, critique and alienation—throughout this dissertation, it emerges that though "fact" and "fiction" form an instable binary, the insistent play with its volatility is not only tiresome, but also out of time. Amidst authoritarian resurgence, this risk exceeds critical discourse: the playful deconstruction of these categories is not only an old hat, it also runs the risk of evincing the kind of political tone-deafness that *The Gift* conveys despite its self-parody.

In summary, fictocriticism has not aged well, and perhaps for this reason, interest in it remains limited to certain niches. Yet this decline primarily applies to the term itself. Overall, the trend to blend scholarly and personal writing has only increased and found its new expression in the term "autotheory," a portmanteau of autobiography and theory that has largely displaced fictocriticism. Much like the latter, autotheory investigates knowledge as an embodied experience, performs a form of sincerity through the "exposure of a vulnerable self that recognizes its contingency and social/linguistic constructedness while nevertheless insisting upon the 'reality' and value of lived experience" (Clare 86). Both styles share a striking resemblance, emerge from

the same intellectual intersection of feminist and poststructural theory and yield generic ambiguity. Moreover, autotheory shares fictocriticism's dubious claim to originality. Some critics point out, for example, that Freud's work could justifiably be thought of as autotheory (Laubender 44). Its constitutive generic blurriness impedes general assessments and any writing so steadfastly anchored in the subjective necessarily comes with limitations for collective thought and action (Clare 90). Yet it is notable that autotheory like Nelson and Rankine are at pains to prevent the impression of political naivety of the kind described above. This avoidance of undue aloofness might explain why, in contrast to fictocriticism, autotheory has gained considerable attention as something to be studied (Cavitch; Fournier), practiced (Berlant and Stewart) and sold.

Despite their commonalities, fictocriticism and autotheory act on slightly different discursive territories. Whereas the former's goal could be summarized as subjectivizing theory, the latter instead theorizes the subjective. In most accounts, fictocriticism thus refers to criticism that takes literary and sometimes fictional liberties (Muecke; Gibbs; Taussig). Conversely, the paradigmatic texts by Nelson and Rankine are so firmly grounded in the wider sphere of life writing as to make few claims of fictionality. Whereas Browning's scholarship might still fall into the fictocritical category, however, *The Gift* fits neither. Rather than either enriching an academic text through literary means or, alternatively, making sense of personal experiences through theory, *The Gift* contains both obviously fictionalized passages as well as sections that read like an informal theory handbook.

Once again, literature engaging with theory is hardly new. The novel has always been a hybrid genre, particularly when conscious of its "dialogical quality" in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense (Shepherd). What is new, however, is the intensity of this engagement. Marta Dvořák distinguishes between modernist writers with a distinct interest in theory and their postmodernist heirs who self-reflexively ground their entire fiction in theory (161). Indeed, generations of writers personally encountered French Theory on campus (Cusset), and many went on to write fiction that engages with it formally (cf. Holland, *Succeeding;* Timmer) or as a topic matter (cf. Dames, "Theory").

Judith Ryan observes that the engagement with theory is a common trope of contemporary fiction not only in campus novels. Much fiction published in the last decades, she argues in *The Novel after Theory*, "might be said to 'know about' literary and cultural theory. Some build on theory, some argue against it, others modify it in important ways" (1). As Andersen's consciously

naïve effort of initiating a gift economy and Tye's economically transparent performances illustrate, *The Gift*'s engagement with theory not only encompasses Ryan's list of the three but—like the other examples of "critical fiction" this dissertation analyzes (Timmer 23, see section 2.1)—puts some theorems to the test.

Browning herself calls this "performative writing[,]" a style that "not merely bring[s] the aesthetic arsenal of performance to the page" but also "hopes to actually *do* something—perform an action—in the world" ("Performative" 56, original emphasis). For Gibbs, such performativity is as an effect of fictocriticism's formal idiosyncrasy. It is necessarily "an always singular and entirely tactical response to a particular set of problems—a very precise and local intervention, in other words. The fictocritical act is, strictly speaking, inimitable." ("Fictocriticism"). Once the generic ambiguity discussed above is understood to be integral for such writing, the confusion about what it actually is becomes less important: The answer must always depend on the specific context. Its "inimitable" mode of experimentation enables it to engage in distinctive forms of knowledge production and *The Gift* makes a corresponding attempt through its interest in collaboration.

6.3. The Reader as Collaborator

The Gift explores "the eros inherent in the collaborative process" in various ways (196) and Andersen/Browning's dance videos and song covers exemplify how some of these surpass the printed page. Andersen lets her friends change her literary representation of them and at one point even muses about a novel in which everyone depicted could transparently edit the relevant passages: "I could actually print it with the Track Changes visible, so it would say in the margin something like, 'Tye Larkin Hayes 6/22/13 08:55 AM—DELETED:' and then show the egregious error I'd committed and he'd corrected" (71). In line with *The Gift*'s enduring rhetoric of transparency, the text then immediately discusses its inspiration by discussing Sophie Calle's creative partnership with Paul Auster (Calle; Auster). In this vein, the text also frequently invites the readers to the extratextual activity of, in one reviewer's words, "fiendishly Googling, reverse-engineering [Browning's] entire imagination and proving that her fiction is, in fact, 'merely' her life" (Gregory).

The Gift's stylistic evocation of a blog first appears to adapt the diary, which throughout its history served many as "a kind of personal friend" to be entrusted with intimacies. The obvious

difference is that, historically, the diary was "kept under lock and key" (Nicholson 33) whereas blogs exemplify public self-disclosure. Yet the varied engagement of Browning's book with written exchanges gradually reveals its central reference to be the epistolary novel, particularly its recent experimental appropriations, such as Kraus' *I Love Dick*. In Browning's view, epistolary fiction demands the reader's "corporeal self-implication" and "attempts to reproduce the affective and often erotic contact established through text, it has the potential to enfold the reader in an erotic act" ("Performative" 48). From a conversation initiated by "a bit of spam" in Andersen's inbox (1), constant "texting back and forth" with Tye (13) to her elaborate email discussions with Sami, written exchanges guide *The Gift*'s form throughout. The form is also conjured because a "name doppelgänger" in Illinois has an almost identical email address and Andersen receives "family photos or personal messages that have gone astray" and learns about an abusive husband, an estranged daughter as well as a therapist's advice (8, 141–42, 77, 192).

The Gift makes similar allusion to confessional narratives. These are often ironic, such as when Andersen declares: "I have a confession to make. I haven't been doing my ballet exercises" (228). Yet others are markedly heartfelt, as when interspersed allusions to the American HIV/Aids crisis in the 1980s and 90s evoke personal and collective traumas. Andersen compares Pussy Riot to ACT UP and discusses cultural responses to "the advent of effective HIV therapies" (94, 82). Most importantly, she hypothesizes that her own "atrocious" memory derives from a Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) triggered when—as she reports in an "entirely true" poem included in full and originally ascribed to Browning herself—the "love of [her] life died / of AIDS" (71, 22; Garth Greenwell in Dames, "Novels"). Conversely, Andersen discloses late in the novel that her lover Olivia is "entirely fictional […] because someone else found it too painful to be part of the story when she read the first draft of this manuscript" (202). The novel's closing pages feature a cathartic scene in which this "someone else," supposedly Andersen's real lover, appears as a guitarist playing "the howling agony of the world," a cameo allegedly requested by herself: "After I hurt her, the stipulation she gave me was that the only way she wanted to appear in my fiction was in a brief cameo as a rock star" (233).

The emotional charge of these passages enables *The Gift* to transcend metafictional games of truth versus fiction that, on their own, would be exasperating.[32] In an authorial intrusion accentuated through verbatim repetition on two different pages, Andersen states: "I don't always think it's bad to misrepresent oneself. In fact, I wouldn't use that word, and I certainly wouldn't use the word *lying.* But in my case, I always call it fiction. Even in my fiction, if I say, 'This really happened,' then it's true. It really happened" (168, 235, original emphasis). Exhibiting the playful self-awareness of its "compulsively honest" author (Browning in R. Miller), *The Gift* takes the liberty to fictionalize but simultaneously insists that select parts of it are to be believed.

Linda Hutcheon has described metafiction as "fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity" (1), or as she puts it elsewhere, a fiction that contains a "representational self-consciousness" (qtd. in Dvořák 161). By drawing attention to itself as a fiction, metafiction can foster a meaningful engagement with both the creation and reception of literature, but much scholarship on metafiction is wary about its propensity for solipsism. Often associated with postmodernist literature, metafiction is conventionally linked to detachment and self-referentiality. *The Gift*'s most prominent feature might indeed be excessive self-involvement, Andersen's "I" never leaves center stage. The text also routinely blurs the lines between fact and fiction and at times even amalgamates various of Andersen/Browning's fictions. As her meeting with Sami falls through, Andersen is struck by some similarities to an earlier fiction of hers: "What was really weird was that something almost exactly like this had happened in a novel I wrote—that first one that Sami had read. In that novel, my narrator travels all the way to Bamako to meet her secret lover, but he doesn't show up, and it turns out there's been a miscommunication" (160). *The Gift* may make repeated claims of authenticity, but at the same time it persistently draws attention to its own status as a fiction.

Although it evidently employs metafictional techniques, *The Gift*'s lack of a story prevents it to be a good fit. Much like Lin's *Taipei* is more "auto" than "fiction"—an "auto-nonfiction" perhaps—and troubles its generic categorization, *The Gift* is metafiction without (much) fiction;[33] or in adaptation of Hutcheon, a "discourse about fiction." In addition, Browning employs

[32] *The Gift*'s explicit ethics would certainly forbid to play metafictional games when it comes to such topics. Browning briefly reports about her personal experience of traumatic loss during the HIV/Aids in her scholarly writing (*Infectious Rhythm* 196–97).
[33] Thanks to James Dorson, who made this apt observation during a discussion of the book.

metafiction toward different effects than canonical postmodernism and emulates what Konstantinou calls "credulous metafiction," a "postironic genre" attempting "to foster the reader's capacity to believe. The content of this postironic belief is," he continues, "less important than the capacity to believe as such" (*Cool* 41). Similarly, the novel modifies autofiction's typical self-involvement. Jenny Hendrix rightly observes that in contrast to the autofictional works of Heti, Kraus or Lerner (all of whom the novel references), *The Gift* is ultimately "directed outward, toward the reader, rather than toward the writing self." Through these outward gestures, it firstly asks the reader to believe in the veracity of Andersen's various trauma stories and secondly fosters the reader's belief in the creative opportunities of collaboration.

For it is the reader who becomes Andersen's most important collaborator. The book's informal style places whoever is reading it at the receiving end of a series of intimate episodes that begin like "Oh, I didn't tell you about [,]" "I just realized I should really be saying more about [,]" or end digressions with "Well, I started all this to tell you about […]" (54, 107, 99). In contrast to a story told in third person, *The Gift*'s first-person narrative does not grant its readers the comfortable distance of a detached observer. Whether they like it or not, they are involved in Andersen's life in "inappropriately intimate" ways (6). Through *The Gift*'s multimedia paratexts, the readers see Andersen/Browning perform nude dances, hear her sing sensual songs and learn much about her love life.

In return, the readers are bestowed with a degree of trust when Andersen presents certain passages of her published text as an unfinished manuscript. After recounting an informal conversation with Berlant, she muses: "I'll have to check with her to see if I can quote her on that. It might be the kind of thing she'd say in a hotel bar but not in a book" (129). Likewise, Andersen makes the reader her co-conspirator whom she entrusts with supposedly sensitive information, such as that Tye is "an alias" (199). For his wellbeing, she requests that if "you do figure anything out about Tye, I wonder if you could be so discreet as to keep it under your own hat" (198). Before the main text even begins, the book's interleaves provide the login to Browning's password protected dance videos (v). These trusting gestures are complemented by Andersen's anxious insistence that she meets the reader at eye level as "an extremely moderate person" with "minimal assets" not only with regards to her "musical gifts" (4, 68). *The Gift* can also be seen to reveal its vulnerability through its "genre flailing," an expression Berlant coined to describe "a mode of crisis management

that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one's confidence about how to move in it" ("Genre" 157). Such attempts at (re)establishing a sense of order are palpable in both Andersen's zany daily life as well as the book's countless generic allusions.

Since no one genre prevails and a relevant plot is missing, the book's major development is arguably the reader gradually replacing Sami as Andersen's central confidant and creative partner. Although the reader is involved from the very start, this involvement intensifies in the book's third part after Andersen's botched trip to Cologne, and specifically on its last page. Here, Andersen muses "I seem to be talking to myself. Before I felt I was talking to you" (235). Because she has expressed this verbatim to Sami before (168), the "you" on *The Gift*'s last page implies the reader not only by the pronoun's ambiguity, but addresses them directly and exclusively. The book concludes with the "gold dance to music" first inspired by Sami but now gifted to the reader. Preceding the dance's still image, the text finishes as thus:

> In my mind, you were beautiful, damaged, and less freakish than you thought. I wanted to show you that. I wanted to make you something—maybe a little charming, maybe a little funny, or sexy, a small song, or a dance, or this novel. […]
> I made this for you. It was the last thing I did. It comes from the heart.
> Love, Barbara (235).

Suitably on its last page, Andersen's complimentary close serves as the novel's clearest reference to the epistolary form and, as Browning herself would have it, "effectively places the reader in the role of the recipient of a letter" ("Performative" 48).

Browning/Andersen's dance literalizes Felski's idea of reading as an intimate ballet dance, a "pas de deux" that only works if both partners can trust each other to give and receive the right impulses at the right time (*Limits* 176). The very shift of narrative attention from Sami to whoever is reading *The Gift* ('dancing with' Browning/Andersen) marks its relation to the reader as a collaboration rather than a one-sided address. Andersen replaces her flawed relation with Sami in favor of a new, more hopeful connection. By suggesting that it formally depends on the reader's presence for this change, *The Gift* indicates a sense of "united labour" distinguishing a collaborative artwork from one that 'merely' engages its recipient (OED). Following Hyde's homonymous book once more, Browning's novel presents itself as "an embodiment of the problem it addresses"

(L. Hyde xvii) by insisting on its own status as a creative gift. This insistence in turn facilitates a formal equivalent to *The Gift*'s thematic interest in mediated intimacy.

The progression from the failed relationship to Sami toward a hopeful attempt at intimacy with the reader signals a switch from digital to analog mediation. *The Gift* certainly embraces digital culture and one of its thematic successes lies in its attention to "how our surface encounters with strangers' disclosures occupy more and more of our deep feelings about the world, and then, magically, produce meaningful engagements" (Bryson). But much like *Goon Squad*'s reflective nostalgia for pre-digital art and attention to what is lost in digital exchanges (see section 4.4.2), *The Gift* finally suggests that relations mediated by analog media—such as the body or the printed book—remain better suited to nurture and sustain intimacy. If one subscribes to Browning's view of reading as a form of corporeal involvement, the readers also fill the void left behind by Andersen's "entirely fictional" lover Olivia (202), the only person with whom Andersen shares embodied intimacy (her ailing mother is a partial exception). Andersen twice quips that "[m]y body is an extension of my body" (51, 211) and the book's general interest in the unclear demarcations of posthumanist bodies is marked by Sami's silicone prosthetic leg, by musical instruments, sex toys (48–52) and even art itself, when it is understood as "as an extension of the person who made it" (Browning in R. Miller). Embracing the double entendre, Browning's text presents itself as a *gifted* prosthesis capable of initiating intersubjective intimacy.

Recalling what Yousef calls the "paradox of intimacy," the unbreachable gap between the innermost, which must remain unrelatable, and the intimacy we do (want to) share, it becomes clear that such outward gestures always also highlight the very distance between the text's exposure and the reader. While this contradiction must always remain, Yousef sees literature as capable to alleviate its inherent opposition and offer a state of "being-alone-together" (4). *The Gift* offers an allegory for its faith in literature's parasocial capacity for intimacy when Andersen discusses how she likes "to knit things for people. I think about them while I'm knitting, and I handle the yarn with my fingers, and I always feel like if they're wearing the thing I knit for them, somehow it's kind of a way of having physical contact with them, even if we're far apart" (85). In the analogy of literature, Andersen thinks of every single reader who will ever pick up her book already at the time of writing.

Whereas Browning's novel thus explores what it means "to have an intimacy that is mobile in [innovative] ways" (Greenwell in Dames, "Novels"), its success or failure ultimately depends on the reader who, unlike the characters with editing privileges, consented neither to being confronted with "all this intimacy" nor to being formally involved (129)—and might simply but the book down. Andersen muses by way of quoting Berlant that love amounts to "an aspiration to be in sync" with the other (83, 87). The preliminary stage of intimacy might then require the readers to attune themselves, for example, to the digitally mediated, nude, dancing body that Andersen forces upon them in the way her friends do: One watches "them with the dry eye of a critic" to announce, "without an ounce of sentimentality[,]" that "they were the best thing [Andersen had] ever made." Another kisses her "on the top of [her] head" with "tears in his eyes" (132).

The central question for *The Gift* then turns out to be whether the reader can readily be "in sync" with the book, that is to say whether they take it seriously enough to accept its gift of recognition after over two hundred pages of chatter, excessive self-referentiality, but also a palpable ethos of care. Whether, in other words, the reader is willing to suspend their disbelief after being shown a whole host of techniques of misrepresentation. After all, this meditation on gift giving warns against its own proclaimed optimism by way of numberless gratuitous and unsolicited gifts; a novel that many readers may well view as collapsing under its many layers of metafiction, or as a literary analog to the spam email that opens the novel. For what it is worth, the jury of the 2017 Lambda Literary Awards was convinced of *The Gift*'s aesthetic value (Coffee House Press) and so are most reviewers, who recognize "a delicious love letter to readers and co-conspirators everywhere" (Kirkus) and praise its oddly vulnerable "metatextual confessions" (Hendrix).

But despite the assertions that certain events within *The Gift* "really happened," fiction can of course never prove its veracity, and this applies especially to texts so steeped in the theories and literary techniques of the linguistic turn. Andersen herself admits that "it's just a little difficult sometimes to maintain the illusion" of her own (meta)fiction (235). By explicating such difficulties throughout the novel, *The Gift* attunes itself to New Sincerity literature in that it explicates a reader that conventionally would only be implied (Kelly, "New" 206). Identifying its counterpart beyond the page, *The Gift* cannot determine whether its asserted sincerity will be believed. Any reader may reasonably reject the idea that their act of reading signifies a collaboration. Indeed, they might well treat the book's 'gifts' just like they would unsolicited emails. That is, ignoring this annoyance

instead of reciprocating. While the novel does not ask its readers to abide by Andersen's optimism in gift exchange, it prompts them to somehow engage with the idea and insists on its collaborative offer. As the concluding section shows, however, this engagement encounters paratextual problems on its own.

6.4. A Tax-Deductible Gift

On a personal scale, Andersen's envisioned creative gift economy arguably works out somehow. Over a drink in a bar, Berlant gifts the witticism that "maybe all love [is] autistic" to Andersen, she in turn relays it to Sami. He then reciprocates with "a complex guitar meditation called 'Love Is Autistic'" (129, 130). In the familiar pattern, this inspires Andersen to dance and, as has just been discussed, ultimately draw the reader into the exchange. A handful of similar cases notwithstanding, Andersen's impulse to "try something else" nevertheless runs out of steam. Only few recipients of her song covers actually reply, and even fewer return the favor of an artistic gift. Whereas her attempt at "jump-start[ing] a creative gift economy" falls flat (5), Tye's levelheaded rationale to work within the given social system violates the book's mandate to "dream and enact new and better pleasures" (v). Given *The Gift*'s collaborative impetus, it is up to the reader to reflect on these respectively unsatisfying results—and synthetize something better. Sharing her alter ego's optimism, Barbara Browning expresses hopes that "the spilling of characters' lives outside the covers of a book" could effect real world change ("Performative" 53). But the imagined path from *The Gift*'s (main) text to the "real world" leads them past a paratextual apparatus that troubles this journey.

Browning's earlier novels were put out by the family-run, independent publisher Two Dollar Radio. In turn, *The Gift* is a "Emily Books Original"—an ironic designation given that the book insists that there is nothing original about it. Emily Books specializes in "weird books by women" and runs as an imprint of the non-profit publisher Coffee House Press, a distributor of literature too ambitious, quirky or risky for conventional publishers. As attested by the book's interleaves, however, this does not imply a detachment from the wider commercial sphere: "Coffee House Press Books are made possible through the generous support of grants and donations from corporations, state and federal grant programs, family foundations, and the many individuals who believe in the transformational power of literature." This includes "major operating support" from the "Amazon literary partnership," the "Target foundation" and other foundations of the Fortune

500 (238). This ironic paratextual comment reveals *The Gift*, a book that presents itself as a gift and explores ways to transcend the market-mode of exchange, as a mere variation of what McGurl calls *The Novel In the Age of Amazon* (38).

This is the state of affairs during the "Conglomerate Era" in publishing (Sinykin): Non-profit publishers draw their financial support from public grants and private donors rather than book sales. Yet in comparison to conventional publishing houses, this merely entails a different engagement with, rather than a withdrawal from, the literary market. Konstantinou summarizes that "nonprofits and small publishers often dialectically supplement corporate publishing, acting as talent scouts, breaking in risky authors, and building experimental new brands" ("Lewis" 142). Whereas conventional publishers "must produce sales numbers by satisfying the audience[,]" Dan Sinykin highlights, non-profit publishers "must satisfy donors by producing prestige" (483). He argues with reference to Bourdieu that this investment in prestige, or symbolic capital, may eventually be financially rewarding. Indeed, contemporary luminaries like Nelson, Rankine and Lerner published their early work with reputable non-profit presses such as Coffee House, Graywolf as well as Soft Skull and only afterwards became financially successful through well-endowed prizes and bestselling books. All three can now be showcased as examples for the importance of supporting the arts, for instance through tax-deductible donations by corporate foundations.

Drawing on these examples, Sinykin concludes that the conventional distinction between modernism eschewing and postmodernism embracing commercial interest has become futile. Instead, some of the most interesting contemporary literature negotiates its own complicitly in the market while its creators learn "how to negotiate symbolic capital by capitalizing on the many ways it brings publishers not merely prestige but also financial capital, through grants, prizes, recognition, and sales" (488). As discussed before (see section 5.3), Crosthwaite calls such literature "market metafiction." For him, and in spite of *The Gift*'s theme and rhetoric, the book is not only not "a gift" but a commodity at the price of $15,95 (for this chapter's edition). More importantly, it cannot be one:

> the novel's highlighting of its own commodity status (precisely in idiosyncratically and provocatively presenting itself as a gift) and its publisher's foregrounding of its business model (based on the 'gifts' of its donors) usefully emphasize for us that if […] formally innovative works of literature not geared to prevailing market norms are to continue to be produced, then they themselves cannot simply be gifts (258).

Crosthwaite is right to emphasize that the point of examining the tension between *The Gift*'s main text and its "framing apparatus" ought not to be "a cheap gotcha" (258), but it remains worthwhile to think about why Browning's chatty and otherwise self-aware novel remains strikingly silent about the very gifts that helped to create and circulate the gift it itself claims to be.

Andersen's central interlocutor Hyde and his work's affinities with the just described publishing environment offers a plausible explanation. In an essay on "Lewis Hyde's Double Economy," Konstantinou examines the tacit compromise position Hyde offers for the proclaimed opposition between art and the market. "It is the assumption of this book[,]" Hyde states in his introduction, "that a work of art is a gift, not a commodity. Or, to state the modern case with more precision, that works of art exist simultaneously in two 'economies,' a market economy and a gift economy" (xxii). Konstantinou draws attention to the "unexplained reconciliation between art and the market, an elided step in his reasoning" between the quote's first and second sentence. He sees this as an example of "compromise aesthetics" (130), a term he borrows from Rachel Greenwald Smith who coined it to describe the amalgamation of mainstream and (formerly) avant-garde practices that enables writers to voice unease about the current state of "market triumphalism" (L. Hyde xviii) without either becoming cynical or having to advocate for fundamental change (more on this notion in chapter 7).

This clarifies the many high-profile blurbs for the 2007 reissue of Hyde's *The Gift* by, amongst others, Jonathan Lethem, Zadie Smith and David Foster Wallace. After all, these are writers whose fiction grapples with exactly these kinds of questions. "Though Hyde later claims that his argument might help oppose end-of-history triumphalism," Konstantinou concludes, "his compromise might instead be taken as something like a final settlement between the gift and the commodity, between artistic value and market value" (130). Hyde's "double economy" indicates this reconciliation:

> The artist must always mentally balance the *logos* of the market with the *eros* of the gift, negotiating 'this double economy,' perhaps finding a literary agent who can 'work[] the market'—act as a mediator or buffer—while the artist 'labors with his gift.' Calculate, Hyde seems to say, but not too much. Get paid if you can, but don't labor (or *don't only labor*) for the money. Make your art in the gift-sphere, but when entering the marketplace, you had better find a good agent (134, original emphases).

Hyde's synergy identified in the combination of creativity and the market echoes Boltanski and Chiapello's notion of the "artistic critique," a plea for less rigid hierarchies as well as more

autonomy and creativity in the workplace (xiii; cf. Konstantinou 131). To repeat (see section 2.3), they show this critique to have been thoroughly absorbed by *The New Spirit of Capitalism*.

Hyde's accommodating notion of managing the "double economy" arguably finds its explicit synthesis in the discursive rise of the "creative economy," in which every worker can, and indeed must, strive for self-expression and autonomy. As a cofounder of the "Creative Capital Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization" fundraising tax deductible donations to "help artists develop imaginative projects, engage diverse audiences, and steer their career paths" (qtd. in Konstantinou 140), Hyde is now at home in this exact sphere. As state support for the arts is in steady decline, such organizations fill in the financial gaps in the cultural sphere. These are worthy goals, but by further privatizing (the support for) the arts, such organizations necessarily participate in the very opposite of what Hyde set out to do (141). For Konstantinou, this ambiguity is caused by Hyde's displacement of a material analysis "of the gift economy's institutional basis" with questions of ethics, spirit and disposition; his stylistic elegance leaves room for writers and readers to believe in fundamental change "without doing the hard work of abolishing or radically constraining the market economy that allegedly drains art of its powers" (142). By neglecting to historicize the notion of the artistically gifted, Hyde perpetuates the myths that Sarah Brouillette views as central links between *Literature and the Creative Economy*, specifically the entrepreneurial rhetoric around the "artist-author" as "symbol of autonomy from routine, standardized, mechanized production hostile to individuals" (54).

What is Barbara Andersen/Browning, if not an "artist-author"? Whereas her strenuous rhetorical efforts signal harmless benevolence, the hybrid figure fails to investigate the historical origins and social circumstances that make possible her life of playful self-expression. And much like its socially unaware protagonist, *The Gift* neglects to reflect upon its own genesis beyond a personal level. (Mis)guided by Hyde and his analytical blind spots, *The Gift* necessarily falls short of its professed goal to inspire the "new and better pleasures" that a profoundly different social order could offer. But, of course, such a revolutionary task is a tall order, even for a "performative novel" with a "communist" protagonist, and faulting the novel for not "abolishing or radically constraining the market economy" is beside the point. While *The Gift* does not actually imagine ways to surpass the current market-driven society, its idiosyncrasy inevitably draws attention to the fact that meaningful art, whether the reader recognizes this particular novel as such or not,

requires space, time and money (Crosthwaite 258–59). This is not revolutionary by any measure. But given that contemporary art has virtually no choice but to arrange itself somehow within the market, drawing attention to this very fact must count as an artistic achievement that can initiate a reflection on how to trouble this arrangement.

7. Conclusion: Compromise(d) Intimacy

> 'How are you going to pay for all of this?' she asked me.
> 'On the strength of my *New Yorker* Story' […]
> 'Is that why you've exchanged a modernist valorization of difficulty as a mode of resistance to the market for the fantasy of coeval readership?'

The above exchange, taken from Ben Lerner's *10:04* (93), is actually a soliloquy. After a visit to a fertility clinic, the novel's autofictional writer-protagonist Ben imagines a dialogue with the not-yet-conceived child. The conceit first calms his anxiety about the process of donating sperm for his close friend Alex, with whom he agrees that "making love […] would have been bizarre" (7, 92). After all, their "most intimate exchanges" emerge in situations in which their gazes are "parallel, directed in front of us" at an object "and not at each other […] We did not avoid each other's eyes […] but we tended to fall quiet when they met." Their "coconstructed" intimacy (8) lends itself to clinical mediation not least because the latter promises to maintain their parallel perspective onto such a third subject—the child—even in the process of creating it.

Ben manages to calm himself down at first, but then his "voice went on talking without [his] permission" and the imaginary conversation takes a critical turn: The future child interrogates him about the money involved and, after a string of questions about the price tags of intrauterine insemination, in vitro fertilization and the "[a]verage annual cost of a baby in New York[,]" she arrives at the above question of funding (92–93). The query is loaded, for the readers know that Ben's "*New Yorker* story," as predicted by his agent at the novel's opening, has earned him "a 'strong six-figure' advance" for the very novel they are reading (4).[34] Ben's compromise with the market's demand for consumable literature literally affords the intimate compromise he has reached with his friend—helping her to procreate without intimacy in its euphemistic connotation, and before having decided if he "was prepared to be a donor or a father" (91).

As the preceding chapters attest, this is merely one variety in which some of contemporary fiction addresses its own relationship to the (literary) market, be it in ambivalent (Wallace and

[34] Moreover, Lerner authored three acclaimed but commercially negligible volumes of poetry before he himself "exchanged a modernist valorization of difficulty as a mode of resistance to the market for the fantasy of coeval readership" by writing novels (93). In part due to *10:04*'s success, he has meanwhile received a MacArthur Fellowship and become one of today's most celebrated authors.

Egan), affirmative (Lin) or disingenuous terms (Browning). This awkward position between the complicity of pricing in what the market demands while holding on to formal aspirations results in what scholars alternatively call "finance fiction" (Boever), "market metafiction" (Crosthwaite) or "compromise aesthetics." Rachel Smith has coined the latter term for art that strikes an ultimately affable balance between formal innovation and readerly pleasure, social critique and complacency. Whereas numerous avant-gardes throughout the 20th century evinced aesthetic (which was often paired with political) radicalism, "the past few decades have seen a dramatic increase in critics and writers whose interest in formally innovative work once may have made them seek out oppositional positions arguing instead that such polarizations are no longer necessary" ("Six" 182). Not by coincidence, Smith discusses Lerner's *10:04*, for although "most, if not all, contemporary works of literary fiction" are making these kinds of compromises, "it is rarely thrown at a novel's readers with such insistent force" (*Compromise* 132–33). However, in distinction to e.g. Crosthwaite's sympathy for Lin's and Browning's respective versions of "market metafiction," Smith thinks of compromises as "ugly, makeshift, disappointing" (4). Compromises may be necessary to political discourse but why, she asks, would anyone applaud compromise(d) art?

Much like in the case of Lerner's *10:04*, the longing for intimacy in the literature analyzed here is both a compromise and compromised. Intimacy is compromised, as this study's primary texts attest, in that it remains instable and inevitably betrays its utopian promise. Whether it is self-help clichés and social incompetence in *The Pale King*, networks' detrimental effects on intersubjectivity in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, alienation in *Taipei* or overbearing shamelessness in *The Gift*: whenever intimacy emerges as the goal, failure and disappointment is not far. Yet while all texts display an awareness about capitalism's corrupting influence on social relations and even subjectivity, explicit opposition against its reifying force is largely absent. With the exception of the subtly hopeful *Goon Squad* (see section 4.5), these texts no longer search for a (modernist) "glitch" in the dominant regime. Similar to how the discussed fiction meditates about its own compromised artistic aspirations, the desire for intimacy it describes and (sometimes) exerts remain precarious.

But if anything, intimacy's elusiveness does reinforce rather than reduces its allure. Even as a frustrated wish, Shumway insists, intimacy remains "the most significant refuge from the social fragmentation of late capitalism." Yet, to recall, it is "a purely private refuge, and thus no solution

to the degradation of society" (27). Intimacy's worth as creating a discursive safe space from the many social burdens is obvious. But this retreat from the world's general incomprehensibility also marks its fundamental problem, for it precludes the option of contesting the very social relations that drive the desire for intimacy in the first place. As such, the compromise of intimacy attests to the problematic "belief in the universal value of the personal" (R. G. Smith, "Six" 185), connects to America's longue durée of antimodernism (see section 2.1.1) and evokes complicity "as a correlative to the spread of global capitalism" (Kelly and Norman 674).

In addition to suggesting privatism, the kind of intimacy discussed here is available only to a privileged few. Because late capitalism not only fragments, but also drives wealth inequality, the group of people with the time, space and resources to enable (or help sustain) literarily mediated intimacy is ever more exclusive. In this regard, the wider cultural move toward intimacy also signals a retreat by those— mostly educated, middle-class, white—who do not want to be bothered by the world's many ills, let alone the people who have to primarily burden them. Stuelke views the humanities' reparative turn as a "feel-good fix" for those in power, a form of alleviation that ultimately maintains the status quo (30). This of course echoes Berlant and Sennett, who observed decades ago that the emotional reaction a particular action provokes now regularly effaces a discussion about the action itself (discussed in section 2.1.1). This is, after all, why Sennett perceived a tyrannical potential of intimacy (*Fall* 337). These critiques remain convincing and, as this study's chapter on postcritique has shown, the methodological compromises of the reparative turn entail substantial problems. Postcritique may preach the open-endedness of the reading process, but its rhetoric reliably emphasizes harmony over antagonism, enchantment over disorientation, attachment over estrangement. In other words, it appears a suitable methodological accompaniment for what historian Steven Fraser pointedly calls the ongoing *Age of Acquiescence*.

But what about intimacy's potential in and for literature? Assuming that it ever was, fundamental opposition in the style of the avant-garde seems unfeasible today. Rachel Smith's book on, but primarily against, compromise is a case in point: Her argument against the outsized role the personal plays in today's intellectual discourse itself relies heavily on a personal register, indicating the very kind of compromise with current trends in critical writing that Smith bemoans. But this bespeaks self-reflection rather than ignorance. For Smith, the omnipresence of compromise means that its categorical refusal would not lead anywhere either. As one of her reviewers writes:

"For all its animus toward the private, Smith's book thus ends up giving a surprisingly intimate […] portrayal of the dangers of compromise's outright rejection as well" (Fleissner, "What"). Moreover, mixing formal ambition with mainstream appeal does not automatically signify an aesthetic compromise:

> If we look closely at contemporary literary works, we can see that aesthetic challenges continue to exist in works that at first glance look like they conform to the qualities championed by compromise aesthetics. Many of these works are hybrid in form: they bring together formal strategies from a range of aesthetic inheritances. Yet this hybridity does not resolve into an easy state of compromise ("Six" 191).

Whereas some fiction's "conciliatory modes" hence signify the "attempt to put conflict to rest[,]" others draw attention to "the degree to which compromises will always remain unstable and incomplete […] an incorporation of recognizable experimental and mainstream modes that demonstrates the inherent instability of both." Amidst social and artistic calcification, Smith suggests "we might take comfort" in this remainder of unruliness (192–93).

As it emerges, this assessment bears out to what the preceding chapters have charted as contemporary fiction's range of intimacy. Wallace's *The Pale King* and Browning's *The Gift* employ intimacy effects toward less radical agendas than some interpreters (or the text themselves) claim. *The Pale King* supplements its critique of neoliberal governance with a longing for large and caring institutions. The novel's nostalgic glance backward effects intimacy for its readers, yet it remains unimaginative on how society's present deprivation, lamented by Wallace as much as by Shumway, could be challenged. Browning's *The Gift* conversely makes all kinds of claims about intimacy's revolutionary capacities, yet its self-consciously naïve efforts are not as conscientious as the author-protagonist would like the reader to believe. Rather, its obliviousness signals ignorance about the very economic underpinning of intimacy.

Indicating intimacy's many uses, Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* shows that the futile efforts for intimacy its numerous characters undertake relate to their networked conditions, a social form that favors ever more (however fleeting) connections over lasting bonds. While the fragmentary narrative attests to intimacy's apparent impossibility, it simultaneously invites the readers to look out for moments in which this exhausting sociality could be overturned and replaced by something more humane. The peculiar form of intimacy on display in Tao Lin's *Taipei* even thrives on the many awkward moments that would normally signal its inhibition. By mutely recording the interpersonal inaptitude that according to its reception is familiar to its readers, *Taipei*

achieves something similar to Egan's text: it creates an unadorned awareness for intimacy's elusiveness. Whereas the texts differ in their (lack of) care about whether this situation can or should change, they both correspond to Lerner's *10:04* in that "tension, contradiction, and transformation […] abide" (R. G. Smith, "Six" 193).

The above assessment signals that this study judges some of the chosen primary texts to be more successful than others at highlighting intimacy's connections to its apparent opposite, the social. But this is not to imply an imposition of either "success" or "failure" onto a selection of texts that all refuse such binaries. It is the individual reader who ultimately decides on intimacy's (lack of) success. For, once more, "others cannot breathe the atmosphere of intimacy between intimates" (Wilner 25). Passing judgement on the "atmosphere of intimacy" is an intimate affair itself, it is gradual and revocable, for intimacy transcends clear dichotomies and does not necessarily exert the permanence it promises. Today's intimacy may well always have to succeed and fail at the same time; after all, post-Fordism fosters such contradictory states. The work of laying bare such contradictions and confronting the reader with them may thus signify the best contemporary literature can do. When fiction turns the conventional understanding of intimacy, with all its overlooked contradictions, on its head, when it turns "intimate intimacy" into "social intimacy," when it thinks intimacy alongside some of its many antonyms, Shumway's "purely private refuge" may indeed turn into a solution against "the degradation of society."

Despite differences from text to text, "the aesthetics and economics of intimacy" in recent fiction reach out to their readers. Their usefulness thus ultimately depends on whether this gesture is met by the texts' reading others, on whom the fulfillment of their inherent potential relies. The ambivalence of this mobilization bears repeating: however problematic the focus on the single reader and its diversion from what should be social concerns into the private realm may be, some contemporary fiction insistently reminds its readers of intimacy's social dimension. After decade-long discursive domination of intimacy as something of a private shelter, this shift may not be groundbreaking—and it may well fail, like so many characters discussed in the preceding pages. Yet however small the scale, this change nevertheless indicates a much-needed course correction in the understanding of intimacy's social force.

Works Cited

@BretEastonEllis. *With "Taipei" Tao Lin Becomes the Most Interesting Prose Stylist of His Generation, Which Doesn't Mean That "Taipei" Isn't a Boring Novel…* 4 Mar. 2013, twitter.com/BretEastonEllis/status/308502148226883584. Accessed 21 July 2021.

@tao_lin. *I Recommend That People Who Want to Get a Vaccine Be Careful. Vaccines Contain Known and Unknown Toxins, Including Glyphosate, and If You're Already Weak or Heavily Toxified You Might Get a Serious Injury or Die or Get an Autoimmune Disease Months or Years Later.* 14 Dec. 2020, twitter.com/tao_lin/status/1338578993369505794. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Aarseth, Espen J. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.

Abramis, David. "Play in Work." *American Behavioral Scientist,* vol. 33, no. 3, 1990, pp. 353–73.

Adorno, Theodor W. *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*. Edited by Lydia Goehr. Columbia UP, 2005.

Agamben, Giorgio. "What Is the Contemporary?" *"What Is an Apparatus?": And Other Essays,* Stanford UP, 2009, pp. 39–54.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* Second edition. Edinburgh UP, 2014.

---. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke UP, 2017.

Allardice, Lisa. *Ottessa Moshfegh: 'Americans Are Really Good Storytellers and Really Good Liars'.* 15 Aug. 2020, www.theguardian.com/books/2020/aug/15/ottessa-moshfegh-americans-are-really-good-storytellers-and-really-good-liars. Accessed 12 Sep. 2022.

Alworth, David J. *Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form*. Princeton UP, 2016.

Andersen, Tore Rye. "Pay Attention! David Foster Wallace and His Real Enemies." *English Studies,* vol. 95, no. 1, 2014, pp. 7–24.

Anderson, Sam. *New Lit Boy: Tao Lin.* 9 Jan. 2009, nymag.com/news/features/all-new/53358/. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

Anker, Elizabeth S., and Rita Felski, editors. *Critique and Postcritique*. Duke UP, 2017.

Araya, Jorge. "Why the Whiteness? Race in the Pale King." *Critical Insights: David Foster Wallace,* edited by Philip Coleman, Salem Press, 2015, pp. 238–51.

Arendt, Hannah, editor. *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin.*

Ashton, Jennifer. *Do We Need Adorno? We Are All Capitalists, Too.* 17 Sep. 2012, nonsite.org/do-we-need-adorno/. Accessed 24 Aug. 2021.

---. “Labor and the Lyric: The Politics of Self-Expression in Contemporary American Poetry.” *American Literary History,* vol. 25, no. 1, 2013, pp. 217–30.

---. “Poetry of the Twenty-First Century: The First Decade.” *The Cambridge Companion to American Poetry Since 1945,* edited by Jennifer Ashton, Cambridge UP, 2013, pp. 216–30.

Asmelash, Leah. *These NYU Students Want Tuition Reimbursement. Their Dean Said No Refunds, Offering a Dance Video of Herself Instead.* 29 Mar. 2020, edition.cnn.com/2020/03/28/us/nyu-tisch-school-of-arts-tuition-reimbursement-trnd/index.html. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Attridge, Derek. “‘This Strange Institution Called Literature’: An Interview with Jacques Derrida.” *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Literature,* edited by Derek Attridge, Routledge, 1992, pp. 33–75.

Attwood, Feona, et al. “Mediated Intimacies: Bodies, Technologies and Relationships.” *Journal of Gender Studies,* vol. 26, no. 3, 2017, pp. 249–53.

Augé, Marc. *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. Verso, 1995, www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy1311/94046299-b.html.

Auster, Paul. *Leviathan*. Penguin, 1993, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gbv/detail.action?docID=6056835.

Austin, Jonathan Luke, et al. “Doing and Mediating Critique: An Invitation to Practice Companionship.” *Security Dialogue,* vol. 50, no. 1, 2019, pp. 3–19.

Baker, Jeff. *Tao Lin Gets High, Writes About Getting High, Readers Yawn.* 10 Jan. 2019, www.oregonlive.com/books/2013/06/jeff_baker_tao_lin_gets_high_w.html. Accessed 24 Aug. 2021.

Banita, Georgiana. “Literature After 9/11.” *American Literature in Transition, 2000–2010,* edited by Rachel Greenwald Smith, Cambridge UP, 2017, pp. 152–64.

Barck, Karlheinz, et al. “Ästhetik/ästhetisch.” Barck et al., *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe,* pp. 308–99.

Barck, Karlheinz, et al., editors. *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe: Historisches Wörterbuch in sieben Bänden*. Metzler, 2010.

Barnett, Mac. *David Foster Wallace, My Teacher.* The Guardian. 12 Sep. 2016, www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/sep/12/david-foster-wallace-my-teacher. Accessed 21 Dec. 2019.

Bawer, Bruce. *The Victims' Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind*. Broadside Books, 2012.

Beal, Wesley, and Stacy Lavin. "Theorizing Connectivity: Modernism and the Network Narrative." *Digital Humanities Quarter,* vol. 5, no. 2, 2011, www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/vol/5/2/index.html.

Beck, Julie. *The Concept Creep of 'Emotional Labor'.* 1 Jan. 2018, www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/arlie-hochschild-housework-isnt-emotional-labor/576637/. Accessed 26 Feb. 2019.

Beck, Ulrich. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity.* Translated by Mark Ritter. Sage Publications, 1992 [1986].

Beers, David. *Irony Is Dead! Long Live Irony!* Salon. 1 Jan. 2001, www.salon.com/2001/09/25/irony_lives/. Accessed 10 June 2019.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov." Arendt, *Illuminations,* pp. 83–107.

---. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Arendt, *Illuminations,* pp. 217–52.

Bentley, Lisa. "Warped Conjunctions: Jacques Rancière and African American Twoness." Weinstein and Looby, *American Literature's,* pp. 291–312.

Berlant, Lauren Gail. *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Duke UP, 1997.

---. "Intimacy: A Special Issue." *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 281–88.

---. "The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics." *Cultural Pluralism, Identity Politics, and the Law,* edited by Austin Sarat and Thomas Kearns, U of Michigan P, 1999, pp. 49–84.

---. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Duke UP, 2008.

---. *Cruel Optimism*. Duke UP, 2011.

---. "Genre Flailing." *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry,* 2018, pp. 156–62.

Berlant, Lauren Gail, and Kathleen Stewart. *The Hundreds*. Duke UP, 2019.

Berlant, Lauren Gail, and Michael Warner. "Sex in Public." *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 547–66.

Bernes, Jasper. *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization*. Stanford UP, 2017.

Best, Stephen, and Sharon Marcus. "Surface Reading: An Introduction." *Representations,* vol. 108, no. 1, 2009, pp. 1–21.

Bewes, Timothy. "Introduction: Temporalizing the Present." *Novel,* vol. 45, no. 2, 2012, pp. 159–64.

Bittner, Martin, and Anke Wischmann, editors. *Kritik und Post-Kritik: Zur deutschsprachigen Rezeption des "Manifests für eine Post-Kritische Pädagogik"*. transcript, 2022.

Bloom, Allan. *Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students*. Simon & Schuster, 1988.

Bock, Charles. *Young Love.* 24 Sep. 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/09/26/books/review/Bock-t.html. Accessed 3 Aug. 2021.

Boever, Arne de. *Finance Fictions: Realism and Psychosis in a Time of Economic Crisis*. Fordham UP, 2018, www.degruyter.com/isbn/9780823279197.

Boggs, Abigail, and Nick Mitchell. "Critical University Studies and the Crisis Consensus." *Feminist Studies,* vol. 44, no. 2, 2018, p. 432. doi:10.15767/feministstudies.44.2.0432.

Bolger, Robert K., and Scott Korb, editors. *Gesturing Toward Reality: David Foster Wallace and Philosophy*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

Boling, Patricia. *Privacy and the Politics of Intimate Life*. Cornell UP, 1996, purl.org/coar/access_right/c_16ec.

Boltanski, Luc, and Ève Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Verso, 2007.

Bordwell, David. *The Way Hollywood Tells It: Story and Style in Modern Movies*. U of California P, 2006, site.ebrary.com/lib/academiccompletetitles/home.action.

Boswell, Marshall. "Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace's *the Pale King*." *English Studies,* vol. 95, no. 1, 2014, pp. 25–39.

---. *The Wallace Effect*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. Basic Books, 2001.

Brandes, Peter. "Gabe, Gastfreundschaft." *Handbuch Literatur & Ökonomie,* edited by Joseph Vogl and Burkhardt Wolf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 140–42.

"Brat Pack." *The Oxford Companion to English Literature,* edited by Dinah Birch, 7th ed., Oxford UP, 2009.

Bröckling, Ulrich. *The Entrepreneurial Self: Fabricating a New Type of Subject*. Sage Publications, 2015.

Bromley, James M. *Intimacy and Sexuality in the Age of Shakespeare*. Cambridge UP, 2012.

Brouillette, Sarah. *Literature and the Creative Economy*. Stanford UP, 2014.

---. *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary*. Stanford UP, 2020.

---. *Reading After the University.* 23 Nov. 2022, www.publicbooks.org/reading-after-the-university-english-departments/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Brown, Nicholas. *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism*. Duke UP, 2019.

Brown, Wendy. *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*. Zone Books, 2015.

---. "Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics." *Constellations,* vol. 23, no. 1, 2016, pp. 3–14.

Browning, Barbara. *There Are a Few Things I'd Like to Share with You…* www.barbarabrowning.info/. Accessed 22 Jan. 2022.

---. *Samba: Resistance in Motion*. Indiana UP, 1995.

---. *Infectious Rhythm: Metaphors of Contagion and the Spread of African Culture*. Taylor and Francis, 1998.

---. *The Correspondence Artist*. Two Dollar Radio, 2011.

---. *I'm Trying to Reach You*. Two Dollar Radio, 2012.

---. *Caetano Veloso: A Foreign Sound*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

---. *The Gift: (Or, Techniques of the Body)*. Coffee House Press, 2017.

---. *The Weird World of Book Blurbs.* 26 May 2017, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/tip-sheet/article/73733-the-weird-world-of-book-blurbs.html. Accessed 20 May 2022.

---. "The Performative Novel." *TDR/The Drama Review,* vol. 62, no. 2, 2018, pp. 43–58.

---. *Barbara Browning, Professor.* 1 Feb. 2022, tisch.nyu.edu/about/directory/performance-studies/3015339. Accessed 18 Mar. 2022.

---. *Barbara Browning's SoundCloud Page.* 1 Mar. 2022, soundcloud.com/barbarabrowning. Accessed 5 Apr. 2022.

Browning, Barbara, and Sébastien Régnier. *Who the Hell Is Imre Lodbrog?* Outpost 19, 2018.

Bryan-Wilson, Julia. *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era*. U of California P, 2010.

Bryson, Evan. *Barbara Browning's the Gift Is Auto-Fiction That Falls Flat.* 23 May 2017, thirdcoastreview.com/2017/05/23/barbara-brownings-the-gift-is-auto-fiction-that-falls-flat/. Accessed 25 May 2022.

Buchanan, Ian. *Fredric Jameson: Live Theory*. Continuum, 2006.

---, editor. *A Dictionary of Critical Theory.* 2 ed. Oxford UP, 2018, www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919.

---. "Heterotopia." Buchanan, *A Dictionary of.*

---. "Jetztzeit." Buchanan, *A Dictionary of.*

---. "Non-Place." Buchanan, *A Dictionary of.*

Burn, Stephen J. "A Paradigm for the Life of Consciousness: Closing Time in *the Pale King*." *Studies in the Novel,* vol. 44, no. 4, 2012, pp. 371–88.

Burnham, Peter. *Fordism.* Oxford UP. www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199670840.001.0001/acref-9780199670840-e-496.

Burt, Stephanie. *Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry*. Graywolf Press, 2009.

Burton, Scott. *Have You Left Society yet? Scott Burton Interviews Tao Lin.* 3 Aug. 2021, www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/have-you-left-society-yet/. Accessed 1 Jan. 2021.

Butchard, Dorothy. "Jennifer Egan." Eaglestone and O'Gorman, *The Routledge Companion,* pp. 360–71.

Butter, Michael. *"Nichts Ist, Wie Es Scheint": Über Verschwörungstheorien*. Suhrkamp, 2018.

Cahn, Steven M., editor. *Freedom and the Self: Essays on the Philosophy of David Foster Wallace*. Columbia UP, 2015.

Calle, Sophie. *Double Game*. Violette Ed, 1999.

Cancian, Francesca M. *Love in America: Gender and Self-Development*. Cambridge UP, 1987.

Carby, Hazel V. *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist*. Oxford UP, 1987.

Carruth, Allison. "The Digital Cloud and the Micropolitics of Energy." *Public Culture,* vol. 26, no. 2, 2014, pp. 339–64.

Carson, Tom. *Rock and Television.* Encyclopædia Britannica. 14 Dec. 2007, www.britannica.com/topic/rock-and-television-1369757. Accessed 24 July 2020.

Cassin, Barbara. *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?* Fordham UP, 2016.

Cavitch, Max. "Everybody's Autotheory." *Modern Language Quarterly,* vol. 83, no. 1, 2022, pp. 81–116.

Chaouli, Michel, et al., editors. *Poetic Critique*. De Gruyter, 2021.

---. "What Is Poetic Critique?" *Poetic Critique,* edited by Michel Chaouli et al., De Gruyter, 2021, pp. 1–6.

Chen, Carolyn. *Work Pray Code: When Work Becomes Religion in Silicon Valley*. Princeton UP, 2022.

Ciccoricco, David. *Reading Network Fiction*. U of Alabama P, 2007.

Citton, Yves. *Lire, Interpréter, Actualiser: Pourquoi Les Études Littéraires*. Éditions Amsterdam, 2007.

Clare, Ralph. "Becoming Autotheory." *Arizona Quarterly,* vol. 76, no. 1, 2020, pp. 85–107.

Clough, Patricia Ticineto, and Jean O'Malley Halley, editors. *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*. Duke UP, 2007.

Clune, Michael W. *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945–2000*. Cambridge UP, 2010 158.

Cobb, Shelley, and Diane Negra. "'I Hate to Be the Feminist Here…': Reading the Post-Epitaph Chick Flick." *Continuum,* vol. 31, no. 6, 2017, pp. 757–66.

Coffee House Press. *The Gift.* 1 Jan. 2017, coffeehousepress.org/products/the-gift. Accessed 14 June 2022.

Cohen, Joshua. *Camera Obscura: Fiction Writer Tao Lin Projects His Life as a Series of Boredom-Filled Blog Posts.* 1 Sep. 2010, www.bookforum.com/print/1703/fiction-writer-tao-lin-projects-his-life-as-a-series-of-boredom-filled-blog-posts-6361. Accessed 3 Aug. 2021.

Cohen, Samuel, and Lee Konstantinou, editors. *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. U of Iowa P, 2012.

Cole, Teju. *Open City*. Faber & Faber, 2011.

Collins, Jim. *Bring on the Books for Everybody: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*. Duke UP, 2010.

Cowart, David. "Thirteen Ways of Looking: Jennifer Egan's a Visit from the Goon Squad." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 56, no. 3, 2015, pp. 241–54.

Cox, Christopher. *Jennifer Egan.* The Paris Review. 25 June 2010, www.theparisreview.org/blog/2010/06/25/qa-jennifer-egan/. Accessed 22 May 2020.

Crane, Kylie. "Australia." *Handbook Autobiography/Autofiction,* edited by Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, De Gruyter, 2017, pp. 1087–113.

Crosthwaite, Paul, et al. "The Economic Humanities and the History of Financial Advice." *American Literary History,* vol. 31, no. 4, 2019, pp. 661–86.

Crosthwaite, Paul. *The Market Logics of Contemporary Fiction*. Cambridge UP, 2019.

Cuddon, John Anthony, et al. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

Cuonz, Daniel. "New Economic Criticism." *Handbuch Literatur & Ökonomie,* edited by Joseph Vogl and Burkhardt Wolf, De Gruyter, 2019, pp. 33–47.

Currie, Mark. *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time*. Edinburgh UP, 2006.

Cusset, François. *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States.* Translated by Jeff Fort. U of Minnesota P, 2008.

D'Erasmo, Stacey. *The Art of Intimacy: The Space Between*. Graywolf Press, 2013.

Dames, Nicholas. "Theory and the Novel." *n+1, no.* 14, Summer 2012, pp. 157–69.

---. *Seventies Throwback Fiction: A Decade in Review.* 31 Dec. 2014, www.nplusonemag.com/issue-21/reviews/seventies-throwback-fiction/. Accessed 19 Aug. 2022.

---. *Novels & Intimacy: Episode 3.* Season Two: The Novel Now, Public Books 101. 22 Mar. 2021, www.publicbooks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/S2E3-GreenwellWright_2021_03_21_FINAL.pdf. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Danto, Arthur C. "Warhol, Andy." *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics,* edited by Michael Kelly, 2. Ed., Oxford UP, 2014.

Davis, Devra Lee. *The Secret History of the War on Cancer*. Basic Books; Perseus Running distributor, 2007.

Dean, Tim. *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking*. U of Chicago P, 2009.

Derrida, Jacques. *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*. U of Chicago P, 2017 [1992].

Dinnen, Zara. *"This Is All Artificial": An Interview with Jennifer Egan.* Post45. 1 Jan. 2016, post45.org/2016/05/this-is-all-artificial-an-interview-with-jennifer-egan/. Accessed 24 May 2020.

Dirschauer, Marlene. "Sleep as Action? World Alienation, Distance, and Loneliness in Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*." *Fictions of Distance in Recent American Literature,* edited by Fabian Eggers and Sonja Pyykkö, Universität Graz, 2022, pp. 42–61. 2.

DISQUS. *Tao Lin.* 8 Oct. 2020, disqus.com/by/tao_lin/about/. Accessed 20 July 2021.

Dorson, James. "The Neoliberal Machine in the Bureaucratic Garden: Pastoral States of Mind in David Foster Wallace's *the Pale King*." *Rereading the Machine in the Garden: Nature and Technology in American Culture,* edited by Eric Erbacher et al., Campus Verlag, 2014, pp. 211–30.

---. "How (Not) to Make People Like You: The Anti-Popular Art of David Foster Wallace." *Unpopular Culture,* edited by Martin Lüthe and Sascha Pöhlmann, Amsterdam UP, 2016.

---. "Unformed Forms: Genre Theory and the Trouble with Caroline Levine's *Forms*." *The Genres of Genre: Forms, Formats, and Cultural Formations,* edited by Cécile Heim et al., Narr Francke Attempto, 2019, pp. 23–41. SPELL Volume 38.

Drucker, Johanna. *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*. U of Chicago P, 2005.

Dvořák, Marta. "Metafiction and Ficto-Criticism, the Ultimate Subversions of Genre: Atwood's and Van Herk's Writings as Exempla." *Essays on Canadian Writing, no.* 84, fall 2009, pp. 159–81.

Eaglestone, Robert. "Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto." *Textual Practice,* vol. 27, no. 7, 2013, pp. 1089–101.

Eaglestone, Robert, and Daniel O'Gorman, editors. *The Routledge Companion to Twenty-First Century Literary Fiction*. Routledge, 2019.

Eagleton, Terry. *After Theory*. Lane, 2003.

---. "Not Just Anybody." *London Review of Books,* vol. 39, no. 1, 2016, pp. 35–37. www.lrb.co.uk/v39/n01/terry-eagleton/not-just-anybody.

Eakin, Paul J., and Philippe Lejeune, editors. *On Autobiography*. U of Minnesota P, 1989.

Edwards, Caroline. "The Networked Novel." Eaglestone and O'Gorman, *The Routledge Companion,* pp. 13–24.

Egan, Jennifer. *A Visit from the Goon Squad Reader's Guide: A Note from Jennifer Egan.* www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/201020/a-visit-from-the-goon-squad-by-jennifer-egan/9780307592835/readers-guide/. Accessed 8 May 2020.

---. *A Visit from the Goon Squad*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2010.

---. *Look at Me*. Corsair, 2011 [2001].

---. *The Candy House: A Novel*. Scribner, 2022.

Eggers, Dave. *What Is the What: The Autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng*. McSweeney's, 2006.

Eggers, Fabian. "'Quality Time' with David Foster Wallace: *The Pale King*'s Emotional Economy." *Work: The Labors of Language, Culture, and History in North America,* edited by J. Jesse Ramírez and Sixta Quaßdorf, Narr Francke Attempto, 2021, pp. 35–51. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 40.

---. "US-Amerikanische Literaturwissenschaft Im Postfordismus: New Sincerity Trifft Postkritik." Scherübl, *Verabschiedungen der "Postmoderne"* pp. 45–66.

Ehrenreich, Barbara, and Arlie Russell Hochschild. *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*. Metropolitan/Owl Books, 2004.

Ellis, Bret Easton. *Lunar Park*. Knopf, 2005, www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0623/2005040923-b.html.

Emily Books. *Hi, We're Emily Books.* 1 Jan. 2022, emilybooks.com/. Accessed 23 May 2022.

Emre, Merve. *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America*. U of Chicago P, 2017.

English, James F. "Now, Not Now." *Modern Language Quarterly,* vol. 77, no. 3, 2016, pp. 395–418.

Erdman, Joan L. "Review: Samba: Resistance in Motion." *Dance Research Journal,* vol. 30, no. 2, 1998, pp. 76–79.

Eve, Martin Paul. *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict*. Open Book Publishers, 2016.

---. "Sincerity." Eaglestone and O'Gorman, *The Routledge Companion,* pp. 36–47.

Farmer, Michial. "'Cloaked In, Like, Fifteen Layers of Irony': The Metamodernist Sensibility of 'Parks and Recreation." *Studies in Popular Culture,* vol. 37, no. 2, 2015, pp. 103–20.

Felski, Rita. *Uses of Literature*. Blackwell, 2008.

---. *The Limits of Critique*. U of Chicago P, 2015.

---. "Both/And." *American Literary History,* vol. 31, no. 2, 2019, pp. 249–54.

---. *Hooked: Art and Attachment*. The U of Chicago P, 2020.

Ferguson, Kevin L. "Youth Culture on the Skids." *American Literature in Transition, 1980–1990,* edited by D. Quentin Miller, Cambridge UP, 2017.

Ferris, Joshua. *Then We Came to the End: A Novel*. Back Bay Books, 2007.

Finn, Ed. "Becoming Yourself: The Afterlife of Reception." Cohen and Konstantinou, *The Legacy of,* pp. 151–76.

Fisher, Mark. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* John Hunt Publishing, 2009.

---. *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. Zero Books, 2014.

Fisher, Molly. *Why Literary Chauvinists Love David Foster Wallace.* The Cut. 1 Jan. 2015, www.thecut.com/2015/08/david-foster-wallace-beloved-author-of-bros.html. Accessed 1 Jan. 2019.

Fitzgerald, Jonathan D. *Sincerity, Not Irony, Is Our Age's Ethos.* The Atlantic. 1 Jan. 2012, www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2012/11/sincerity-not-irony-is-our-ages-ethos/265466/. Accessed 10 June 2019.

Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network." Cohen and Konstantinou, *The Legacy of,* pp. 182–207.

Flavell, Helen. *Writing-Between: Australian and Canadian Ficto-Criticism.* PhD thesis, Murdoch University, 2004, researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/53/. Accessed 22 Mar. 2022.

Fleissner, Jennifer. "Romancing the Real: Bruno Latour, Ian McEwan, and Postcritical Monism." *Critique and Postcritique,* edited by Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, Duke UP, 2017, 99-126.

---. *What to Do About Freedom?* 1 July 2022, www.publicbooks.org/what-to-do-about-freedom/. Accessed 2 Dec. 2022.

Florida, Richard L. *The Rise of the Creative Class*. Basic Books, 2019 [2002].

Fluck, Winfried. "Resistance! Cultural Studies and the Question of Cultural Change." *REAL - Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature,* vol. 20, 2005, pp. 11–26.

---. "Reading for Recognition." *New Literary History,* vol. 44, no. 1, 2013, pp. 45–67.

---. "Philosophical Premises in Literary and Cultural Theory: Narratives of Self-Alienation." *New Literary History,* vol. 47, no. 1, 2016, pp. 109–34.

---. "The Limits of Critique and the Affordances of Form: Literary Studies After the Hermeneutics of Suspicion." *American Literary History,* vol. 31, no. 2, 2019, pp. 229–48.

Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. MIT Press, 2002 [1996].

Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1978–79*. Edited by Michel Senellart et al. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

---. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Random House, 2012 [1975].

Foundation for Contemporary Arts. *Yve Laris Cohen.* 1 Jan. 2016, www.foundationforcontemporaryarts.org/recipients/yve-laris-cohen/. Accessed 12 Apr. 2022.

Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. MIT Press, 2021.

Fox, Killian. "Jennifer Egan: 'I Would Have Accepted a Marriage Proposal from Roger Daltrey on the Spot'." *The Guardian,* 21 Aug. 2011, www.theguardian.com/books/2011/aug/21/jennifer-egan-interview-observer. Accessed 24 May 2020.

Franzen, Johannes. "Die Trennung Von Publikum Und Autor." *Sprache und Literatur,* vol. 51, no. 1, 2022, pp. 116–33.

Fraser, Steve. *The Age of Acquiescence: The Life and Death of American Resistance to Organized Wealth and Power*. Little Brown and Company, 2015.

Friedlander, Emilie. *Interview: Tao Lin.* 1 Jan. 2013, www.thefader.com/2013/06/04/interview-tao-lin. Accessed 25 May 2021.

Funk, Wolfgang, et al., editors. *The Aesthetics of Authenticity*. transcript, 2014.

Funk, Wolfgang. *The Literature of Reconstruction: Authentic Fiction in the New Millennium*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Gabbert, Elisa. *Some Notes on Tao Lin's TAIPEI.* 4 Aug. 2013, web.archive.org/web/20170811094515/http://thefrenchexit.blogspot.com/search/label/Tao%20Lin. Accessed 1 Jan. 2021.

Gallagher, Jasmine. "New Sincerity in New Zealand Poetry." *Journal of New Zealand literature,* vol. 37, no. 1, 2019, pp. 122–43.

Gallop, Jane. *Thinking Through the Body*. Columbia UP, 1988.

Galloway, Alexander. "Networks." *Critical Terms for Media Studies,* edited by W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen, The U of Chicago P, 2010, pp. 280–96.

Genette, Gérard. *Fiction & Diction*. Cornell UP, 1993.

---. *Die Erzählung.* translated by Andreas Knop, 3rd. ed, revised. Fink, 2010.

Gibbs, Anna. "Bodies of Words: Feminism and Fictocriticism - Explanation and Demonstration." *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses,* vol. 1, no. 2, 1997, www.textjournal.com.au/oct97/gibbs.htm.

---. "Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences." *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses,* vol. 9, no. 1, 2005, www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm.

Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford UP, 1991.

---. *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love, and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Stanford UP, 1992.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1993.

Gioia, Ted. *The Rise of the Fragmented Novel: An Essay in 26 Fragments.* fractious fiction. 1 Jan. 2013, fractiousfiction.com/rise_of_the_fragmented_novel.html. Accessed 24 May 2020.

Gladstone, Jason, et al., editors. *Postmodern/Postwar and After: Rethinking American Literature*. U of Iowa P, 2016.

Gladstone, Jason. "Network Unavailable: Informal Populations and Literary Form." *American Literary History,* vol. 31, no. 1, 2019, pp. 74–95. doi:10.1093/alh/ajy046.

Godden, Richard, and Michael Szalay. "The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace's *the Pale King*." *Textual Practice,* vol. 28, no. 7, 2014, pp. 1273–322.

Goldsmith, Kenneth. *If Walt Whitman Vlogged.* 7 May 2014, www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/if-walt-whitman-vlogged. Accessed 2 Sep. 2021.

Gonzalez, Mira, and Tao Lin. *Selected Tweets*. Short Flight/Long Drive Books, 2015.

goodreads. *Tao Lin.* 8 June 2021, www.goodreads.com/author/show/161218.Tao_Lin. Accessed 20 July 2021.

Goos, Maarten, and Alan Manning. "Lousy and Lovely Jobs: The Rising Polarization of Work in Britain." *Review of Economics and Statistics,* vol. 89, no. 1, 2007, pp. 118–33.

Gould, Emily. *Now We Also Hate Miranda July.* 27 June 2007, www.gawker.com/272734/now-we-also-hate-miranda-july. Accessed 9 Aug. 2021.

Graeber, David. "Communism." *The Human Economy: A Citizen's Guide,* edited by Keith Hart et al., Polity Press, 2010, pp. 199–210.

Graefe, Andreas. *Guide to Automated Journalism.* 7 Jan. 2016, www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/guide_to_automated_journalism.php. Accessed 22 Nov. 2021.

Gratzke, Michael. "The Rise and Fall of 'Emotional Capitalism': Consumerism and Materialities of Love in Dystopian Works by Thomas Melle, Leif Randt and Gary Shteyngart." *The Materiality of Love: Essays on Affection and Cultural Practice,* edited by Michael Gratzke and Anna Malinowska, Routledge, 2017, pp. 101–19.

Gregg, Melissa. *Work's Intimacy*. Polity Press, 2011.

---. "Spouse-Busting: Intimacy, Adultery, and Surveillance Technology." *Surveillance & Society,* vol. 11, no. 3, 2013, pp. 301–10.

Gregg, Melissa, and Thomas Lodato. "Managing Community: Coworking, Hospitality and the Future of Work." Röttger-Rössler and Slaby, *Affect in Relation,* pp. 175–96.

Gregory, Alice. "The Inappropriately Intimate Exchanges of Barbara Browning: On the Contrived Mischief in the Writing, and Life, of the Author of *the Gift*." *The New Yorker,* 2017, www.newyorker.com/culture/persons-of-interest/the-inappropriately-intimate-exchanges-of-barbara-browning.

Gronemann, Claudia. "Autofiction." Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Handbook Autobiography/Autofiction,* pp. 241–46.

Guan, Frank. *Nobody's Protest Novel: On Tao Lin.* 31 Aug. 2014, www.nplusonemag.com/issue-20/reviews/nobodys-protest-novel/. Accessed 23 Aug. 2021.

Guillory, John. *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study*. U of Chicago P, 2022.

Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford UP, 2004.

Haas, Gerrit. *Fictocritical Strategies: Subverting Textual Practices of Meaning, Other, and Self-Formation*. transcript, 2017.

Habermas, Jürgen. *Strukturwandel Der Öffentlichkeit: Untersuchungen Zu Einer Kategorie Der Bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Suhrkamp, 1990 [1962].

Haddad, Vincent. *Novelistic Intimacies: Reading and Writing in the Late Age of Print, 1996 - Present*. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, 2016.

Hager, Christopher. *On Speculation: Infinite Jest and American Fiction After Postmodernism.* www.thehowlingfantods.com/thesisb.htm. Accessed 27 Aug. 2022.

Halfmann, Roman. *Nach Der Ironie*. transcript, 2012.

Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. Penguin, 2005.

Harris, Charles B. "David Foster Wallace's Hometown: A Correction." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 51, no. 3, 2010, pp. 185–86.

Harrod, Mary, et al. *Imagining "We" in the Age of "I"*. Routledge, 2021.

Haselstein, Ulla. *Die Gabe der Zivilisation: Kultureller Austausch und literarische Textpraxis in Amerika, 1682–1861*. Fink, 2000.

Haselstein, Ulla, et al., editors. *The Pathos of Authenticity: American Passions of the Real*. Universitätsverlag Winter, 2010.

Haselstein, Ulla, et al., editors. *The Cultural Career of Coolness: Discourses and Practices of Affect Control in European Antiquity, the United States, and Japan*. Lexington Books, 2013.

Hayes-Brady, Clare. "'…': Language, Gender, and Modes of Power in the Work of David Foster Wallace." *A Companion to David Foster Wallace Studies,* edited by Marshall Boswell and Stephen J. Burn, First edition, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 131–50. American Literature Readings in the 21st Century.

---. *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Heller, Anatol. ""Autor Hier.": Theoriefiktionen Und Autorrückkehr (2000/2020)." Scherübl, *Verabschiedungen der "Postmoderne"* pp. 149–74.

Helmy, Nader Mostafa Helmy. "Towards Mosaic Wholeness: Jennifer Egan's a Visit from the Goon Squad as a Composite Novel." *Occasional Papers in the Development of English Education,* vol. 63, no. 2, 2017, pp. 33–54.

Hendrix, Jenny. *A Smart, Heartbreaking Novel at the Crossroads of Performance and Art.* 1 Jan. 2017, www.nytimes.com/2017/05/26/books/review/the-gift-barbara-browning.html. Accessed 26 Jan. 2022.

Hertz, Noreena. *The Lonely Century: Coming Together in a World That's Pulling Apart*. Sceptre, 2020.

Heti, Sheila. *How Should a Person Be?* Henry Holt, 2012.

---. *Motherhood*. Henry Holt, 2018.

Heti, Sheila, and Tao Lin. *Sheila Heti and Tao Lin in Conversation.* 4 July 2018, granta.com/sheila-heti-and-tao-lin-in-conversation/. Accessed 2 Sep. 2021.

Hines, Andy. *Outside Literary Studies: Black Criticism and the University*. U of Chicago P, 2022, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kxp/detail.action?docID=6944320.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. U of California P, 1983.

---. *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*. Metropolitan Books, 1997.

---. *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes from Home and Work*. U of California P, 2003.

Hoffmann, Lukas. *Postirony*. transcript, 2016.

Holland, Mary K. *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature.* 2013.

---. "'By Hirsute Author': Gender and Communication in the Work and Study of David Foster Wallace." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 58, no. 1, 2017, pp. 64–77.

Holliday, John. "Emotional Intimacy in Literature." *The British Journal of Aesthetics,* 2017.

Hu, Tung-Hui. *A Prehistory of the Cloud*. MIT Press, 2015.

Huehls, Mitchum. *After Critique*. Oxford UP, 2016.

Huehls, Mitchum, and Rachel Greenwald Smith, editors. *Neoliberalism and Contemporary Literary Culture*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2017.

Hugendick, David. *New Sincerity: Das Literarische Selfie.* 14 Jan. 2016, www.zeit.de/2016/03/new-sincerity-literatur-trend-usa-traurigkeit/komplettansicht. Accessed 16 Aug. 2021.

Hungerford, Amy. "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary." *American Literary History,* vol. 20, 1-2, 2008, pp. 410–19.

---. *Making Literature Now*. Stanford UP, 2016.

Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2013 [1980].

Hutner, Gordon. "Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy Hungerford." *American Literary History,* vol. 20, 1-2, 2008, pp. 420–24. doi:10.1093/alh/ajm048.

Hyde, Emily, and Sarah Wasserman. "The Contemporary." *Literature Compass,* vol. 14, no. 9, 2017, e12411.

Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: How the Creative Spirit Transforms the World*. Canongate, 2006 [1983].

Illouz, Eva. *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. U of California P, 2006 [1997].

---. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. U of California P, 2008.

Iser, Wolfgang. "Indeterminacy and the Reader's Response in Prose Fiction." *Aspects of Narrative: Selected Papers from the English Institute,* edited by J. Hillis Miller, Columbia UP, 1971, pp. 1–46.

Jackson, Edward, and Joel Nicholson-Roberts. "White Guys: Questioning Infinite Jest's New Sincerity." *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature,* vol. 5, no. 1, 2017.

Jaeggi, Rahel, et al. *Alienation*. Columbia UP, 2014.

Jaeggi, Rahel. *Entfremdung: Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems : mit einem neuen Nachwort*. Suhrkamp, 2019 [2005].

Jagoda, Patrick. *Network Aesthetics*. U of Chicago P, 2016.

James, Malcolm. *Sonic Intimacy: Reggae Sound Systems, Jungle Pirate Radio and Grime Youtube Music Videos*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

Jameson, A. D. *What We Talk About When We Talk About the New Sincerity, Part 1.* 4 June 2012, htmlgiant.com/haut-or-not/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-the-new-sincerity/. Accessed 20 July 2021.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell UP, 1981.

---. *Postmodernism, Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke UP, 1991.

Jamieson, Lynn. *Intimacy: Personal Relationships in Modern Societies*. Polity Press, 1998.

Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York UP, 2006, www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0730/2006007358-d.html.

Johnston, Katherine D. "Metadata, Metafiction, and the Stakes of Surveillance in Jennifer Egan's a Visit from the Goon Squad." *American Literature,* vol. 89, no. 1, 2017, pp. 155–84.

Jordan, Rieke. *Work in Progress: Curatorial Labor in Twenty-First-Century American Fiction*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2019. Thinking Media.

Julavits, Heidi. *Interview with Jennifer Egan.* 1 July 2010, bombmagazine.org/articles/jennifer-egan/. Accessed 18 Nov. 2020.

Kalbfleisch, Elizabeth. *Making History, Picturing Hysteria: Archaeology, Ficto-Criticism, and the Critical History of Nicole Jolicoeur's La Vérité Folle*. Master Thesis, Concordia University, 2000, spectrum.library.concordia.ca/id/eprint/1230/. Accessed 24 Mar. 2022.

Keating, Conrad. *Smoking Kills: The Revolutionary Life of Richard Doll*. Signal Books, 2014. The Authorised Biography.

Kelleter, Frank. "Style Under Stress: Quotability and Disaster in Lauren Berlant's Cruel Optimism (2011)." *Culture^2,* edited by Frank Kelleter and Alexander Starre, transcript, 2022, pp. 159–87.

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace: The Death of the Author and the Birth of a Discipline." *Irish Journal of American Studies,* vol. 2, 2010, www.ijas.iaas.ie/index.php/article-david-foster-wallace-the-death-of-the-author-and-the-birth-of-a-discipline/.

---. "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays,* edited by David Hering, Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010, pp. 131–46.

---. "Beginning with Postmodernism." *Twentieth Century Literature,* vol. 57, ¾, 2011, pp. 391–422.

---. "The New Sincerity." Gladstone et al., *Postmodern/Postwar and,* pp. 197–208.

Kelly, Adam, and Will Norman. "Literature and Complicity: Then and Now." *Comparative Literature Studies,* vol. 56, no. 4, 2019, pp. 673–92.

Kennedy, Liam, and Stephen Shapiro, editors. *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature*. Dartmouth College Press, 2019.

Kiesling, Lydia. *Modern Life Is Rubbish: Tao Lin's Taipei.* 5 June 2013, themillions.com/2013/06/modern-life-is-rubbish-tao-lins-taipei.html. Accessed 23 Aug. 2021.

Kinnie, Nick, et al. "'Fun and Surveillance': The Paradox of High Commitment Management in Call Centres." *The International Journal of Human Resource Management,* vol. 11, no. 5, 2000, pp. 967–85.

Kirkus. *The Gift.* 20 Feb. 2017, www.kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/barbara-browning/the-gift-browning/. Accessed 25 May 2022.

Klassnik, Rauan. *Tao Lin: Extremely Sincere or Total Put on (??).* 18 June 2013, htmlgiant.com/author-news/tao-lin-extremely-sincere-or-total-put-on/. Accessed 20 July 2021.

Knapp, Steven, and Walter Benn Michaels. "Against Theory." *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 8, no. 4, 1982, pp. 723–42.

Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction*. Harvard UP, 2016.

---. "Lewis Hyde's Double Economy." *ASAP/Journal,* vol. 1, no. 1, 2016, pp. 123–49.

---. "Review of *Site Reading*." *American Literary History,* Review Series XIV, 2018, pp. 1–4. academic.oup.com/DocumentLibrary/ALH/Online%20Review%20Series%2014/14Lee%20Konstantinou.pdf.

---. "Wallace's 'Bad' Influence." *The Cambridge Companion to David Foster Wallace,* edited by Ralph Clare, Cambridge UP, 2018, pp. 49–64.

---. *Autofiction and Autoreification.* 6 Feb. 2021, www.leekonstantinou.com/2021/02/06/autofiction-and-autoreification/. Accessed 5 Aug. 2022.

Koolhaas, Rem. "Junkspace." *October,* vol. 100, Obsolescence (Spring, 2002), pp. 175–90.

Kraus, Chris. *I Love Dick*. Semiotext(e), 1997.

---. *Torpor*. Distributed by the MIT Press; Semiotext(e), 2006. Semiotext(E) Native Agents Series.

---. *Summer of Hate*. Semiotext(e), 2012.

Krauss, Rosalind. "Poststructuralism and the 'Paraliterary'." *October, no.* 13, Summer 1980, pp. 36–40.

Kreilkamp, Ivan. *A Visit from the Goon Squad Reread*. Columbia UP, 2021.

Kushner, Rachel. *The Flamethrowers*. Vintage, 2014.

La Berge, Leigh Claire. "Decommodified Labor." *Lateral,* vol. 7, no. 1, 2018, doi:10.25158/L7.1.2.

Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 30, no. 2, 2004, pp. 225–48.

---. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford UP, 2005.

Lau, Doretta. *Interview: Tao Lin on 'Taipei'.* 4 Sep. 2013, www.wsj.com/articles/BL-SJB-12138. Accessed 24 Aug. 2021.

Laubender, Carolyn. "Speak for Your Self: Psychoanalysis, Autotheory, and the Plural Self." *Arizona Quarterly,* vol. 76, no. 1, 2020, pp. 39–64. doi:10.1353/arq.2020.0001.

Laumann, Edward. O., et al. “Sex, Intimacy and Family Life in the United States.” *The Sexual Self: The Construction of Sexual Scripts,* edited by Michael Kimmel, Vanderbilt UP, 2007, pp. 165–90.

Lawrie, Alexandra. “‘An Experiment in Optimism Was Coming to an End’: Gift Exchange and Giftedness in Two Novels of the Occupy Era.” *Journal of American Studies,* 2021, pp. 1–25.

Lears, T. J. Jackson. *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880 - 1920*. U of Chicago P, 1996.

Leitch, Vincent B., et al., editors. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism.* 2. ed. W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

Lerner, Ben. *Leaving the Atocha Station: A Novel*. Coffee House Press, 2011.

---. *10:04: A Novel*. Granta, 2014.

---. *The Topeka School*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019.

Letzler, David. *The Cruft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention*. U of Nebraska P, 2017.

Levack, Chandler. *~2.5-Hour/IRL Interview with Tao Lin on MDMA: The 11,810-Word Transcript.* 2 Nov. 2010, thoughtcatalog.com/chandler-levack/2010/11/an-interview-with-tao-lin-on-mdma-the-unedited-transcript/. Accessed 15 July 2021.

Levine, Caroline. *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Princeton UP, 2015.

Lieske, Stephan. “Poetik.” *Metzler Lexikon Literatur- und Kulturtheorie: Ansätze - Personen - Grundbegriffe,* edited by Ansgar Nünning, Verlag J.B. Metzler, 2008, pp. 577–79.

Lim, Audrea. *The Drugs Don’t Work: Tao Lin’s “Taipei” and the Literature of Pharmacology.* 19 June 2013, lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-drugs-dont-work-tao-lins-taipei-and-the-literature-of-pharmacology/. Accessed 22 July 2021.

Lim, Eugene. *Playlist: Browning the Gift.* 16 Mar. 2019, open.spotify.com/playlist/0n8jnLKVGI0mYb1N3P9xEs. Accessed 5 May 2022.

Liming, Sheila. *Fighting Words: Review of Rita Felski’s Hooked*. 20 Dec. 2020, lareviewofbooks.org/article/fighting-words/. Accessed 6 Jan. 2023.

Lin, Tao. *You Are a Little Bit Happier Than I Am*. Action Books, 2006.

---. *Bed: Stories*. Melville House, 2007.

---. *Eeeee Eee Eeee*. Melville House, 2007.

---. *Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy: Poetry*. Melville House, 2008.

---. *I Am Offering 60% of the U.S. Royalties of My Second Novel to 'The Public'.* 1 Jan. 2008, reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com/2008/07/i-am-offering-60-of-us-royalties-of-my.html. Accessed 24 June 2021.

---. *Shoplifting from American Apparel*. Random House, 2009.

---. *Richard Yates*. Melville House, 2010.

---. ***contest*** *Discern What Drug I'm 'On'* ***contest****.* 10 May 2010, reader-of-depressing-books.blogspot.com/2010/10/contest-guess-what-drug-im-on-contest.html. Accessed 23 July 2021.

---. *How to Give a Reading on Mushrooms.* 7 Apr. 2011, thoughtcatalog.com/tao-lin/2011/04/how-to-give-a-reading-on-mushrooms/. Accessed 25 July 2021.

---. *Taipei*. Vintage, 2013.

---. *Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change*. Vintage, 2018.

---. *My 9/11 History.* 27 Apr. 2020, www.patreon.com/posts/my-9-11-history-36444434. Accessed 1 Sep. 2021.

---. *Leave Society*. Vintage, 2021.

---. *Tao Lin's Website.* 1 Aug. 2021, www.taolin.us/. Accessed 31 Aug. 2021.

Linett, Maren. "Blindness and Intimacy in Early Twentieth-Century Literature." *Mosaic,* vol. 46, no. 3, 2013, pp. 27–42. doi:10.1353/mos.2013.0030.

Linke, Gabriele. "The Public, the Private, and the Intimate: Richard Sennett's and Lauren Berlant's Cultural Criticism in Dialogue." *Biography,* vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, pp. 11–24.

Lipsky, David. *Although of Course You End up Becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*. Penguin, 2010.

Liu, Alan. *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information*. U of Chicago P, 2004.

---. *Friending the Past: The Sense of History in the Digital Age*. U of Chicago P, 2018.

Lockner, Logan. *15 Great David Foster Wallace Quotes.* Paste Magazine. 21 Feb. 2013, www.pastemagazine.com/blogs/lists/2013/02/15-great-david-foster-wallace-quotes.html. Accessed 21 Dec. 2019.

Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of the Erotic: Erotic as Power." *The Selected Works of Audre Lorde,* edited by Roxane Gay. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020, pp. 29–38.

Lorentzen, Christian. *Tao Lin Will Have the Scallops.* 18 Aug. 2010, observer.com/2010/08/tao-lin-will-have-the-scallops/. Accessed 24 Aug. 2021.

---. *Sheila Heti, Ben Lerner, Tao Lin: How 'Auto' Is 'Autofiction'?* 11 May 2018, www.vulture.com/2018/05/how-auto-is-autofiction.html. Accessed 14 July 2021.

Lowe, Lisa. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. Duke UP, 2015.

Luft, Eric von der. "Closing of the American Mind, the." *The Eighties in America,* edited by Milton Berman, vol. 1, Salem Press, 2008, pp. 219–20.

Luhmann, Niklas. *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy*. Harvard UP, 1986.

Lukács, Georg. *Writer and Critic: And Other Essays*. Merlin Press, 1978.

Lukas, Michael David. *A Multiplicity of Voices: On the Polyphonic Novel.* The Millions. 15 Feb. 2013, themillions.com/2013/02/a-multiplicity-of-voices-on-the-polyphonic-novel.html. Accessed 22 May 2020.

MacCabe, Colin, et al., editors. *Keywords for Today: A 21st Century Vocabulary*. Oxford UP, 2018.

Macé, Marielle, and Marlon Jones. "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being." *New Literary History,* vol. 44, no. 2, 2013, pp. 213–29.

Magill, R. Jay. *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion That We All Have Something to Say (No Matter How Dull)*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2012.

Mak, Geoff. *2013 in Review: Rachel Kushner's "The Flamethrowers" and Caleb Crain's "Necessary Errors".* 25 Dec. 2013, lareviewofbooks.org/article/2013-review-rachel-kushners-flamethrowers-caleb-crains-necessary-errors/. Accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

Marar, Ziyad. *Intimacy: Understanding the Subtle Power of Human Connection*. Acumen, 2014.

Marchand, Jeffrey Scott. "Non-Human Agency." *Posthuman Glossary,* edited by Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 292–95.

Markovits, Elizabeth. *The Politics of Sincerity: Plato, Frank Speech and Democratic Judgment*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2008.

Marsh, Laura. *Infinite Jerk: Adrienne Miller's Memoir of Her Relationship with David Foster Wallace Is Part of an Emerging Genre of Women Coming of Age via an Older, Powerful Man.* The New Republic. 12 Feb. 2020, newrepublic.com/article/156550/infinite-jerk. Accessed 15 Aug. 2020.

Martin, Theodore. "Contemporary, Inc." *Representations,* vol. 142, no. 1, 2018, pp. 124–44.

Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. Edited by Waltraud Falk et al. De Gruyter, 1990 [1887].

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Communist Manifesto*. Edited by Jeffrey C. Isaac and Steven Lukes. Yale UP, 2012.

Masterson, John. "'It's Not Dark Yet, but It's Getting There': Listening for the End Times in the Contemporary American Novel." *Studia Neophilologica,* vol. 88, sup1, 2016, pp. 68–80.

Mauss, Marcel. "Techniques of the Body." *Economy and Society,* vol. 2, no. 1, 1973, pp. 70–88.

---. *Die Gabe: Form und Funktion des Austauschs in archaischen Gesellschaften*. Suhrkamp, 2019.

Max, Daniel T. "D.F.W. Tracing the Ghostly Origins of a Phrase." www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/d-f-w-tracing-the-ghostly-origins-of-a-phrase.

---. *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*. Viking, 2012.

McCaffery, Larry. "An Interview with David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 13, no. 2, 1993, pp. 127–50.

McCarthy, Tom. *Satin Island: A Novel*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.

McClintock, Anne. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. Routledge, 1995.

McDougall, Aislinn Clare. "What Is Cyber-Consciousness? The Digital Mediation of Sincerity and Parody in Tao Lin's *Taipei*." *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings,* vol. 7, no. 1, 2019.

McGurl, Mark. *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing*. Harvard UP, 2011.

---. "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program." *boundary 2,* vol. 41, no. 3, 2014, pp. 27–54.

---. "Real/Quality." *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present,* edited by Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias, New York UP, 2016, pp. 209–22.

---. *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon*. Verso, 2021.

McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *symplokē,* vol. 12, ½, 2004, pp. 53–68.

MDMAfilms. *MUMBLECORE (2011).* Youtube. 1 July 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mcj0wrLBDoE. Accessed 20 July 2021.

Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*. Princeton UP, 2004, www.loc.gov/catdir/description/prin051/2003055640.html.

Miller, Adam S. *The Gospel According to David Foster Wallace: Boredom and Addiction in an Age of Distraction*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. Literary Studies.

Miller, Laura. "The Salon Interview: David Foster Wallace." *Conversations with David Foster Wallace,* edited by Stephen Burn, UP of Mississippi, 2012, pp. 58–65. Literary Conversations Series.

---. *Rachel Kushner's Ambitious New Novel Scares Male Critics: When Rachel Kushner – Not a Venerable Male Auteur - Writes the Great American Novel, Male Reviewers Are Flummoxed.* 5 June 2013, www.salon.com/2013/06/05/rachel_kushners_ambitious_new_novel_scares_male_critics/. Accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

Miller, Rebecca. *'An Expression of Love': Rebecca Miller and Barbara Browning in Conversation.* The Believer. 9 May 2017, thebeliever.net/logger/an-expression-of-love/. Accessed 25 May 2022.

Mills, C. Wright. *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. Oxford UP, 1952.

Miriello, Nicholas. *What Is This Review Interested in? On Frederick Seidel's Review of Rachel Kushner's "The Flamethrowers".* 13 July 2013, lareviewofbooks.org/article/what-is-this-review-interested-in-on-frederick-seidels-review-of-rachel-kushners-the-flamethrowers/. Accessed 22 Aug. 2022.

Missinne, Lut. "Autobiographical Novel." Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Handbook Autobiography/Autofiction,* pp. 464–72.

Mizruchi, Mark S. "Network Theory." *Encyclopedia of Social Theory,* edited by George Ritzer, Sage Publications, 2010, pp. 534–40.

Moling, Martin. "'No Future': Time, Punk Rock and Jennifer Egan's *a Visit from the Goon Squad*." *Arizona Quarterly,* vol. 72, no. 1, 2016, pp. 51–77.

Moore, Jennifer. *'Something That Stutters Sincerely': Contemporary Poetry and the Aesthetics of Failure.* 9 Feb. 2012, jacket2.org/article/something-stutters-sincerely. Accessed 21 July 2021.

Moorey, Gerard. "Aging, Death, and Revival: Representations of the Music Industry in Two Contemporary Novels." *Popular Music and Society,* vol. 37, no. 1, 2014, pp. 65–84.

Moraru, Christian. *Cosmodernism: American Narrative, Late Globalization, and the New Cultural Imaginary*. U of Michigan P, 2011.

Moshfegh, Ottessa. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Penguin, 2019.

---. *Lockdown Should Be Easy for Me, so Why Is It Like Doing Time?* 30 Apr. 2022, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2020/apr/30/lockdown-novel-self-isolation-coronavirus-pandemic-ottessa-moshfegh. Accessed 12 Sep. 2022.

Muecke, Stephen. "The Fall: Fictocritical Writing." *Parallax,* vol. 8, no. 4, 2002, pp. 108–12.

Mueller, Stefanie. "'To Be Reckoned in the Gross': Corporate Storytelling and Quantified Selves in Joshua Ferris's *Then We Came to the End*." *Laboring Bodies and the Quantified Self,* edited by Ulfried Reichardt and Regina Schober, transcript, 2020, pp. 61–80.

Mühlhoff, Rainer, and Jan Slaby. "Immersion at Work: Affect and Power in Post-Fordist Work Cultures." Röttger-Rössler and Slaby, *Affect in Relation,* pp. 155–74.

Muñoz, José Esteban, et al. *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York UP, 2019.

Murray, Mitch R. *All Auto All the Time: Artwork, Art Work, and the University.* www.mitchrmurray.com/all-auto-all-the-time. Accessed 8 Aug. 2022.

Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*. Oxford UP, 1983.

Napier, Ryan. *We Can't Leave Society. We Can Only Change It. Review of Leave Society by Tao Lin.* 1 Oct. 2021, www.jacobinmag.com/2021/10/tao-lin-leave-society-book-review. Accessed 21 Oct. 2021.

Negra, Diane. "Age Disproportion in the Post-Epitaph Chick Flick: Reading *the Proposal*." *Cross Generational Relationships and Cinema,* edited by Joel Gwynne and Niall Richardson, Springer International Publishing, 2020, pp. 55–77.

Nelson, Maggie. *The Argonauts*. Graywolf Press, 2015.

Nelson-Teutsch, Hannah. *If You Have a David Foster Wallace Obsession, Add These 7 Books to Your Reading List.* Bustle. 15 Mar. 2015, www.bustle.com/profile/hannah-nelson-teutsch-1911507. Accessed 21 Dec. 2019.

Newfield, Christopher. "Corporate Culture Wars." *Corporate Futures: The Diffusion of the Culturally Sensitive Corporate Form,* edited by Gorge E. Marcus, U of Chicago P, 1998, pp. 15–62.

---. *Ivy and Industry: Business and the Making of the American University, 1880–1980*. Duke UP, 2004.

---. *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them*. Johns Hopkins UP, 2018.

---. "What Is Literary Knowledge of Economy?" *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics,* edited by Matt Seybold and Michelle Chihara, Routledge, 2019, pp. 15–26.

Ngai, Sianne. "Network Aesthetics: Juliana Spahr's *the Transformation* and Bruno Latour's *Reassembling the Social*." Weinstein and Looby, *American Literature's,* pp. 367–92.

---. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard UP, 2015.

Nicholson, Linda. "Let Me Tell You Who I Am: Intimacy, Privacy and Self-Disclosure." *Intimacies: A New World of Relational Life,* edited by Alan Frank et al., Routledge, 2013, pp. 30–46.

Niemann, Robert. *Zum Wandel des wissenschaftlichen Subjekts: Von kritischer Wissensschöpfung zum postkritischen Selbstmanagement?* transcript, 2019, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kxp/detail.action?docID=5988544.

North, Joseph. *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History*. Harvard UP, 2017.

O'Neill, Lauren. *Want to Read More During the Lockdown? Join Our Corona Book Club.* 25 Mar. 2020, www.vice.com/en/article/jge4jg/want-to-read-more-during-the-lockdown-join-our-corona-book-club. Accessed 7 Nov. 2022.

Ohnesorge, Philipp, et al. "Whither Realism? New Sincerity – Realismus Der Gegenwart." *Realisms of the Avant-Garde,* edited by Moritz Baßler et al., De Gruyter, 2020, pp. 603–18.

Osborne, Peter. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. Verso, 2013.

Oxford English Dictionary Online. *Collaboration, N.* Oxford UP. 1 Sep. 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/36197. Accessed 5 May 2022.

---. *Deskill, V.* Oxford UP. 1 Sep. 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/50902?redirectedFrom=deskilling#eid7014628. Accessed 8 Aug. 2022.

---. *Intimacy, N.* Oxford UP. 1 June 2019, www.oed.com/view/Entry/98503. Accessed 19 July 2019.

---. *Network, N. And Adj.* Oxford UP. 1 Mar. 2020, www.oed.com/view/Entry/126342. Accessed 26 May 2020.

---. *Critique, N.* Oxford UP. 1 Mar. 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/44607?rskey=lN7n5w&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid. Accessed 27 June 2022.

---. *Relationship, N.* Oxford UP. 1 Mar. 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/161816?redirectedFrom=relationship. Accessed 27 Aug. 2022.

Parreñas, Rhacel Salazar, and Eileen Boris, editors. *Intimate Labors*. Stanford UP, 2010.

Parry, Marc. "What's Wrong with Literary Studies? Some Scholars Think the Field Has Become Cynical and Paranoid." *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* www.chronicle.com/article/Whats-Wrong-With-Literary/238480.

Parton, Dolly. *5 to 9: Lyrics.* genius.com/Dolly-parton-5-to-9-lyrics. Accessed 1 Sep. 2022.

---. *9 to 5: Lyrics.* genius.com/Dolly-parton-9-to-5-lyrics. Accessed 1 Sep. 2022.

Patterson, Orlando. "Our Overrated Inner Self." *New York Times,* 2006, www.nytimes.com/2006/12/26/opinion/26patterson.html.

Paulson, Steve. *David Foster Wallace in the #MeToo Era: A Conversation with Clare Hayes-Brady.* Los Angeles Review of Books. 1 Jan. 2018, lareviewofbooks.org/article/david-foster-wallace-in-the-metoo-era-a-conversation-with-clare-hayes-brady/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2020.

Peters, Thomas J., and Robert H. Waterman. *In Search of Excellence*. Harper & Row, 1982.

Peters, Tom. *The Brand You 50 (Reinventing Work): Fifty Ways to Transform Yourself from an 'Employee' into a Brand That Shouts Distinction, Commitment, and Passion!* Knopf Doubleday, 1999, ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/kxp/detail.action?docID=6105203.

Pietsch, Michael. *Everything and More: The Pale King by David Foster Wallace Roundtable Discussion at the PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature.* 1 Jan. 2012, pen.org/multimedia/everything-and-more-the-pale-king-by-david-foster-wallace/. Accessed 1 Jan. 2019.

Plotz, John, creator. "Jennifer Egan in Conversation with Ivan Kreilkamp." *Novel Dialogue*, 2.1, 16 Sep. 2021. noveldialogue.org/2021/09/16/2-1-fiction-as-streaming-genre-as-portal-jennifer-egan-and-ivan-kreilkamp-jp/. Accessed 31 Oct. 2022.

Plummer, Willis. *Tao Lin on Why He Writes.* 16 Aug. 2017, thecreativeindependent.com/people/tao-lin-on-why-he-writes/. Accessed 10 Aug. 2021.

Potkalitsky, Nicolas Joseph. *Refracted Realism and the Ethical Dominant in Contemporary American Fiction.* Dissertation, The Ohio State University, 2019.

Pressman, Jessica. "'There's Nothing Quite Like a Real Book': Stop-Motion Bookishness." *The Printed Book in Contemporary American Culture: Medium, Object, Metaphor,* edited by Heike Schaefer and Alexander Starre, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 155–76.

Puckett, Kent. "Novel Theory (20th Century)." *The Encyclopedia of the Novel,* edited by Peter Melville Logan, John Wiley & Sons, 2010.

Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster, 2000.

Pynchon, Thomas. *V*. HarperCollins, 2005 [1961].

---. *Gravity's Rainbow*. Vintage, 2013 [1973].

Rabinow, Paul. *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*. Princeton UP, 2011.

Radway, Janice A. *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*. U of North Carolina P, 1991 [1984].

Raley, R. Kelly. "Recent Trends and Differentials in Marriage and Cohabitation: The United States." *The Ties That Bind: Perspectives on Marriage and Cohabitation,* edited by Linda J. Waite and Christine Bachrach, De Gruyter, 2000, pp. 19–39.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Graywolf Press, 2014.

Reay, Barry. "Promiscuous Intimacies: Rethinking the History of American Casual Sex." *Journal of Historical Sociology,* vol. 27, no. 1, 2014, pp. 1–24.

Reckwitz, Andreas. *Die Gesellschaft Der Singularitäten: Zum Strukturwandel Der Moderne*. Suhrkamp, 2017.

Reichardt, Ulfried, et al. "Introduction: Network Theory and American Studies." *Amerikastudien / American Studies,* vol. 60, no. 1, 2015, pp. 11–15.

Reilly, Charlie. "An Interview with Jennifer Egan." *Contemporary Literature,* vol. 50, no. 3, 2009, pp. 439–60.

Riddy, Felicity. "Looking Closely: Authority and Intimacy in the Late Medieval Urban Home." *Gendering the Master Narrative,* edited by Mary C. Erler and Maryanne Kowaleski, Cornell UP, 2003, pp. 212–28.

Riesman, David, et al. *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. Yale UP, 1964.

Robb, Simon. *Fictocritical Sentences.* Phd Thesis, University of Adelaide, 2001, digital.library.adelaide.edu.au/dspace/handle/2440/21678. Accessed 24 Mar. 2022.

Robbins, Bruce. “Reading Bad.” lareviewofbooks.org/article/reading-bad/#! .

---. “Too Much Information.” *Novel,* vol. 43, no. 1, 2010, pp. 78–82.

---. “Many Years Later: Prolepsis in Deep Time.” *The Henry James Review,* vol. 33, no. 3, 2012, pp. 191–204.

---. “Not so Well Attached.” *PMLA,* vol. 132, no. 2, 2017, pp. 371–76.

---. “Critical Correctness.” *Chronicle of Higher Education,* vol. 65, no. 27, 2019, www.chronicle.com/article/critical-correctness/.

Robinson, Jenefer. “Emotion and the Understanding of Narrative.” *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature,* edited by Garry L. Hagberg and Walter Jost, Wiley-Blackwell, 2010, pp. 69–92.

Rosa, Hartmut. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. Columbia UP, 2015.

Röttger-Rössler, Birgitt, and Jan Slaby, editors. *Affect in Relation: Families, Places, Technologies*. Routledge, 2018.

Rourke, Lee. *Not Bored, Neutral: An Interview with Tao Lin.* 2 Aug. 2008, www.3ammagazine.com/3am/not-bored-neutral-an-interview-with-tao-lin/. Accessed 20 May 2021.

Rubin, Gayle S. “Thinking Sex.” *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader,* edited by Gayle S. Rubin, Duke UP, 2012, pp. 137–81.

Ryan, Judith. *The Novel After Theory*. Columbia UP, 2012.

Sacks, Michael Alan. “Six Degrees of Separation Theory.” *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Economics and Society,* edited by Frederick F. Wherry and Juliet B. Schor, pp. 1481–82.

Sansom, Ian. *Taipei by Tao Lin.* 4 July 2013, www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/04/taipei-tao-lin-review. Accessed 26 Aug. 2021.

Scherübl, Florian, editor. *Verabschiedungen Der “Postmoderne”: Neuere Historisierungen Von “Theorie” Zwischen “Post-Truth”-Narrativen Und Generationengeschichte*. transcript, 2022.

Schober, Regina. “Transcending Boundaries: The Network Concept in Nineteenth-Century American Philosophy and Literature.” *American Literature,* vol. 86, no. 3, 2014, pp. 493–521.

---. “America as Network: Notions of Interconnectedness in American Transcendentalism and Pragmatism.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies,* vol. 60, no. 1, 2015, pp. 97–119.

---. “Between Nostalgic Resistance and Critical Appropriation: Contemporary American Fiction On/of the Information Age and the Potentials of (Post)Humanist Narrative.” *Amerikastudien / American Studies,* vol. 61, no. 3, 2016, pp. 359–79.

Schratz, Matthew. *The American Novel at Work, 1964–2016.* PhD Dissertation, Brandeis University, 2019, www.proquest.com/docview/2203348902?pq-origsite=primo. Accessed 1 Jan. 2021.

Schuessler, Jennifer. *Inside the List.* New York Times. 1 Jan. 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/books/review/inside-the-list.html. Accessed 21 May 2020.

Schwartz, Alexandra. *Jennifer Egan’s Travels Through Time.* The New Yorker. 1 Jan. 2017, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/10/16/jennifer-egans-travels-through-time.

Schwartz, Mel. *The Art of Intimacy, the Pleasure of Passion: A Journey into Soulful Relationships*. Quantum Press, 1999.

Scott, A. O. “Among the Believers.” *New York Times Magazin,* www.nytimes.com/2005/09/11/magazine/among-the-believers.html.

Scott, John. *Flexible Employment*. Oxford UP.

Seal, Andrew. “How the University Became Neoliberal.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* www.chronicle.com/article/How-the-University-Became/243622.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke UP, 2003.

Sennett, Richard. *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*. Vintage, 1977.

---. *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. Yale UP, 2006.

---. *Building and Dwelling: Ethics for the City.* First American edition. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018.

Serafim, Andreas, et al., editors. *Sex and the Ancient City*. De Gruyter, 2022.

Severs, Jeffrey. *David Foster Wallace’s Balancing Books: Fictions of Value*. Columbia UP, 2017.

Seybold, Matt, and Michelle Chihara, editors. *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics*. Routledge, 2019.

Shapiro, Stephen. “From Capitalist to Communist Abstraction: *The Pale King*’s Cultural Fix.” *Textual Practice,* vol. 28, no. 7, 2014, pp. 1249–71.

Shelden, Ashley T. *Unmaking Love: The Contemporary Novel and the Impossibility of Union*. Columbia UP, 2016.

Shepherd, David. "Dialogism." *The Living Handbook of Narratology,* edited by Jan Christoph Meister and Wilhelm Schernus, www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/67.html. Accessed 13 Apr. 2022.

Sheu, Chingshun J. "What We Talk About When We Talk About New Media: Digital Subjectivity and Tao Lin's *Taipei*." *Textual Practice,* vol. 34, no. 8, 2020, pp. 1269–84.

Shields, David. *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto*. Knopf, 2010.

Shonkwiler, Alison, and Leigh Claire La Berge. *Reading Capitalist Realism*. U of Iowa P, 2014.

Shumway, David R. *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis*. New York UP, 2003.

Sieben, Alois. "'The Bad Thing That You Are': Autofiction and the Internet as Competing Modes of Self-Construction in Megan Boyle's Liveblog." *ESC: English Studies in Canada,* vol. 45, 1-2, 2019, pp. 189–210.

Sinykin, Dan N. "The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965-2007." *Contemporary Literature,* vol. 58, no. 4, 2018, pp. 462–91.

Smith, Jennifer J. *American Short Story Cycle*. Edinburgh UP, 2019.

Smith, Rachel Greenwald. "Six Propositions on Compromise Aesthetics." Gladstone et al., *Postmodern/Postwar and,* pp. 181–96.

---. *On Compromise: Art, Politics, and the Fate of an American Ideal*. Graywolf Press, 2021.

Smith, Terry. *What Is Contemporary Art?* U of Chicago P, 2009.

Smith, Zadie. *Man Vs. Corpse: How Can I Insist Upon the Reality of Death, for Others, and for Myself?* 5 Dec. 2012, www.nybooks.com/articles/2013/12/05/zadie-smith-man-vs-corpse/. Accessed 21 July 2021.

So, Richard Jean. *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction*. Columbia UP, 2021.

Sontag, Susan. *Against Interpretation*. Vintage, 2007 [1966].

---. *Essays of the 1960s & 70s*. Edited by David Rieff. The Library of America, 2013. The Library of America, vol. 246.

Sørensen, Bent Meier, and Sverre Spoelstra. "Play at Work: Continuation, Intervention and Usurpation." *Organization,* vol. 19, no. 1, 2012, pp. 81–97.

Spahr, Clemens. “Prolonged Suspension: Don DeLillo, Ian McEwan, and the Literary Imagination After 9/11.” *Novel,* vol. 45, no. 2, 2012, pp. 221–37.

Spahr, Juliana. *The Transformation*. Atelos, 2007.

Spencer, Douglas. *The Architecture of Neoliberalism: How Contemporary Architecture Became an Instrument of Control and Compliance*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2016.

Stäheli, Urs. *Soziologie der Entnetzung*. Suhrkamp, 2021 2337.

Starobinski, Jean. “The Idea of Nostalgia.” *Diogenes,* vol. 14, no. 54, 1966, pp. 81–103. doi:10.1177/039219216601405405.

Starre, Alexander. *Metamedia: American Book Fictions and Literary Print Culture After Digitization*. U of Iowa P, 2015.

Stearn, Gerald Emanuel, editor. *McLuhan: Hot and Cool: A Primer for the Understanding of and a Critical Symposium with a Rebuttal by McLuhan*. Dial Press, 1967.

Stearns, Peter N. *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth Century Emotional Style*. New York UP, 1994.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule.* U of California P, 2010 [2002].

Storkey, Elaine. *The Search for Intimacy*. Hodder & Stoughton, 1995.

Streisand, Marianne. *Intimität: Begriffsgeschichte und Entdeckung der “Intimität” auf dem Theater um 1900*. Fink, 2001.

---. “Intimität/intim.” Barck et al., *Ästhetische Grundbegriffe,* 175–95.

Strick, Simon. *Rechte Gefühle: Affekte und Strategien des digitalen Faschismus*. transcript, 2021.

Striphas, Theodore G. *The Late Age of Print: Everyday Book Culture from Consumerism to Control*. Columbia UP, 2009.

Strong, Melissa J. “Found Time: Kairos in a Visit from the Goon Squad.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 59, no. 4, 2018, pp. 471–80.

Stuelke, Patricia Rachael. *The Ruse of Repair: US Neoliberal Empire and the Turn from Critique*. Duke UP, 2021.

Sturgeon, Jonathon Kyle. *Review: On Tao Lin’s Taipei*. 1 June 2013, theamericanreader.com/review-on-tao-lins-taipei/. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.

Styhre, Alexander. “What David Foster Wallace Can Teach Management Scholars.” *Academy of Management Review,* vol. 41, no. 1, 2016, pp. 170–83.

Sullivan, John Jeremiah. *Too Much Information.* GQ. 1 Jan. 2011, www.gq.com/story/david-foster-wallace-the-pale-king-john-jeremiah-sullivan?currentPage=1. Accessed 17 Jan. 2020.

Sward, Keith. *The Legend of Henry Ford*. Atheneum, 1968.

Swartz, Aaron. *The Goog Life: How Google Keeps Employees by Treating Them Like Kids.* 1 Jan. 2006, www.aaronsw.com/weblog/googlife. Accessed 26 July 2019.

Swensen, Cole, editor. *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*. W. W. Norton, 2009.

Taussig, Michael. *The Magic of the State*. Routledge, 1997, www.loc.gov/catdir/enhancements/fy0651/96013469-d.html.

---. "I'd Like to Write Something That Comes from Things the Way Wine Comes from *Grapes*." *New Writing,* vol. 16, no. 4, 2019, pp. 400–03.

Terranova, Tiziana. *Network Culture: Politics for the Information Age*. Pluto Press, 2004.

Terrell, Charlotte. "The Limits of Critique." *Textual Practice,* vol. 30, no. 4, 2016, pp. 787–90.

The Center for Fiction. *The Gift with Barbara Browning.* Youtube. 9 Nov. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=osTwg_sGKWg. Accessed 26 Apr. 2022.

Thompson, E. P. "Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism." *Past & Present, no.* 38, 1967, pp. 56–97.

Thompson, Lucas. "'Books Are Made Out of Books': David Foster Wallace and Cormac McCarthy." *The Cormac McCarthy Journal,* vol. 13, no. 1, 2015, pp. 3–26.

---. *Global Wallace: David Foster Wallace and World Literature*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. David Foster Wallace Studies Vol. 1.

Thorn, Jesse. *A Manifesto for the New Sincerity.* 1 Jan. 2006, www.maximumfun.org/blog/2006/02/manifesto-for-new-sincerity.html. Accessed 9 June 2019.

Tietz, Brandon. *The Way of Tao.* 12 May 2010, web.archive.org/web/20150703033947/https://www.chuckpalahniuk.net/interviews/tao-lin. Accessed 1 Aug. 2021.

Timmer, Nicoline. *Do You Feel It Too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*. Rodopi, 2010.

Trebeß, Achim. *Entfremdung Und Ästhetik*. J.B. Metzler, 2001.

Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. Harvard UP, 2009 [1972].

Tucker-Abramson, Myka. "Make Literary Criticism Great Again: Review of David Alworth's Site Reading: Fiction, Art, Social Form." *boundary 2,* 2018, www.boundary2.org/2018/09/

myka-tucker-abramson-make-literary-criticism-great-again-review-of-david-alworths-site-reading-fiction-art-social-form/.

---. "*The Flamethrowers* and the Making of Modern Art." *Neoliberalism and Contemporary American Literature,* edited by Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro, Dartmouth College Press, 2019, pp. 73–91.

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. Basic Books, 2011.

Underwood, Ted. *Why Literary Periods Mattered: Historical Contrast and the Prestige of English Studies*. Stanford UP, 2013.

van Alphen, Ernst, et al., editors. *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*. Stanford UP, 2009.

van Eikels, Kai. "Meine Trägheit ist ebenso furchtlos wie mein Zorn. Ein Lob der Selbstdisziplinlosigkeit." *Selbst-Reflexionen: Performative Perspektiven,* edited by Anne Ulrich et al., Fink, 2011, pp. 155–78.

Vizzini, Ned. *An Interview with Tao Lin.* 1 May 2007, web.archive.org/web/20150317010541/http://www.bookslut.com/features/2007_05_011092.php. Accessed 24 Aug. 2021.

Völz, Johannes. "Alienation Revisited." *American Literary History,* vol. 24, no. 3, 2012, pp. 618–30. www.jstor.org/stable/23249753.

---. "Affektlagen der Singularisierung: Tao Lin am Rande der Erschöpfung." *Autofiktion und die Poetik der Singularisierung,* edited by Johannes Völz, Campus Verlag, 2022, pp. 99–111. WestEnd 19.

Vrettos, Athena. "Psychological Novel." *The Encyclopedia of the Novel,* edited by Peter Melville Logan et al., Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Wagner-Egelhaaf, Martina, editor. *Handbook Autobiography/Autofiction*. De Gruyter, 2017, www.degruyter.com/search?f_0=isbnissn&q_0=9783110279719&searchTitles=true.

Wallace, David Foster. "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." *Review of Contemporary Fiction,* vol. 13, no. 2, 1993, pp. 151–94.

---. *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Little Brown and Company, 1999.

---. *Consider the Lobster: And Other Essays*. Abacus, 2009.

---. *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion About Living a Compassionate Life*. Little Brown and Company, 2009.

---. *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel*. Penguin, 2012 [2011].

Walter-Jochum, Robert. *Autobiografietheorie in der Postmoderne.* Dissertation, 2015.

Warner, Michael. "Uncritical Reading." *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical,* edited by Jane Gallop, Taylor and Francis, 2012.

Warren, Sam, and Stephen Fineman. "'Don't Get Me Wrong, It's Fun Here, But…': Ambivalence and Paradox in a 'Fun' Work Environment." *Humour, Work and Organization,* edited by Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, Routledge, 2013, pp. 92–112.

Webb, Jen, and Donna Lee Brien. "Addressing the 'Ancient Quarrel': Creative Writing as Research." *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts,* edited by Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson, Routledge, 2010, pp. 186–203.

Weber, Max. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Routledge, 2007.

Weinstein, Cindy, and Christopher Looby, editors. *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions*. Columbia UP, 2012.

---. Introduction. Weinstein and Looby, *American Literature's,* pp. 1–36.

White, Rachel R. *Staying up All Night with an Adderall'd Tao Lin.* 5 June 2013, www.vulture.com/2013/06/tao-lin-profile-taipei-drugs-adderall.html. Accessed 1 Aug. 2022.

Wickberg, Daniel. *Antimodernism as Counterculture.* 24 Jan. 2016, s-usih.org/2016/01/antimodernism-as-counterculture/. Accessed 31 Oct. 2022.

Williams, Jeffrey J. "The New Modesty in Literary Criticism." *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* www.chronicle.com/article/The-New-Modesty-in-Literary/150993.

Williams, R. John. *The Buddha in the Machine: Art, Technology, and the Meeting of East and West*. Yale UP, 2014.

---. "World Futures." *Critical Inquiry,* vol. 42, no. 3, 2016, pp. 473–546.

Wilner, Warren. "Philosophical Approaches to Interpersonal Intimacy." *Intimacy,* edited by Martin Fischer and George Stricker, Springer US, 1982, pp. 21–38.

Winkler, Adam. *We the Corporations: How American Businesses Won Their Civil Rights.* First edition. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2018.

Wolfe, Jesse. *Bloomsbury, Modernism, and the Reinvention of Intimacy*. Cambridge UP, 2011, site.ebrary.com/lib/alltitles/docDetail.action?docID=10533224.

Wood, James. *Human, All Too Inhuman: On the Formation of a New Genre: Hysterical Realism.* 1 Jan. 2000, newrepublic.com/article/61361/human-inhuman. Accessed 18 Dec. 2019.

Woodmansee, Martha, and Mark Osteen, editors. *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*. Routledge, 1999.

Worthen, Joseph R. *Autofiction and Selfie Aesthetics.* 16 Dec. 2021, post45.org/2021/12/autofiction-and-selfie-aesthetics/#identifier_6_17026. Accessed 31 Jan. 2022.

Worthington, Marjorie. *The Story of Me: Contemporary American Autofiction*. U of Nebraska P, 2018.

Wren, Daniel A., and Arthur G. Bedeian. *The Evolution of Management Thought*. Wiley, 1972.

Wynne, Laura. *Calm or Hollow, Hard to Say.* 19 Sep. 2019, www.killyourdarlings.com.au/article/calm-or-hollow-hard-to-say-millennial-fictions-existential-crises/. Accessed 12 Sep. 2022.

Yousef, Nancy. *Romantic Intimacy*. Stanford UP, 2013.

Zipfel, Frank. "Autofiktion." *Handbuch der literarischen Gattungen,* edited by Dieter Lamping, Alfred Kröner Verlag, 2009, pp. 31–36.

Zorloni, Alessia, and Antonella Ardizzone. "The Winner-Take-All Contemporary Art Market." *Creative Industries Journal,* vol. 9, no. 1, 2016, pp. 1–14.

Appendix A: English Abstract

Joining the field of New Economic Criticism, this dissertation examines a strand of recent American fiction expressing a yearning for intimacy while simultaneously reflecting on the various material circumstances that frustrate its satisfaction. Through what this study calls the "aesthetics and economics of intimacy," a range of contemporary authors distinguish themselves from postmodernism's playful detachment from the world by deliberating questions of subjectivity, interiority and the difficulty of interpersonal reciprocity with renewed urgency. The selection of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Tao Lin's *Taipei* and Barbara Browning's *The Gift* is cautiously optimistic about intersubjectivity, it evinces an ethical commitment to earnest exchanges within, and via its readers, through literature. As self-aware fiction 'after postmodernism,' these texts negotiate irony (distance) and sincerity (intimacy). They seek to form genuine relations in a post-Fordist society that mandates disintegration and connectivity at once and thus illuminate the contradiction of concealment and disclosure at the heart of reflexive intimacy that, unlike its forerunner romance, demands perpetual attention.

By shedding light on how material relations can exacerbate such dilemmas, the examined primary literature brings attention to intimacy's frequently overlooked economic context. This study employs the analytical tools of New Economic Criticism to contextualize the cultural turn to intimacy—epitomized in literary studies by postcritique—as both symptomatic of reflexive modernization (Beck) and a reaction against economic challenges for literature and literary studies. Given the tangible affinity between the concerned texts' explicit communicative impetus and sociological discourses on a contemporary capitalistic rhetoric of care, this dissertation analyzes the re-emergence of sincerity both against the backdrop of post-Fordism's communicative emphasis and intimacy's discursive history.

Contemporary fiction negotiates intimacy in an open-ended manner. On the one hand, the literary craving for intimacy participates in the antimodernist tradition by seeking individual mitigation from the social burdens that induce such escapism in the first place. On the other hand some fiction can, through meditation on the estranging state of social relations, encourage in its readers' the very reflection on sociality that antimodernist thought eschews. Devoting a full chapter to each of the four selected primary texts, this dissertation heeds the insight that the turn to intimacy's cultural work produces ambivalent artistic results that ought to be studied individually.

Appendix B: Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Im Sinne des New Economic Criticism untersucht die vorliegende Dissertation Texte der zeitgenössischen amerikanischen Literatur, die Sehnsucht nach Intimität ausdrücken und gleichzeitig die verschiedenen wirtschaftlichen Umstände reflektieren, welche die Befriedigung eben dieser Sehnsucht erschweren. Eine Reihe von Texten zeitgenössischer Autor*innen offenbart eine „Ästhetik und Ökonomie der Intimität," in der Fragen nach Subjektivität, Innerlichkeit und mitunter mühseliger Zwischenmenschlichkeit neue Dringlichkeit erfahren und sich damit von der spielerischen Distanziertheit des Postmodernismus abgrenzen. Die untersuchten Texte, David Foster Wallaces *The Pale King*, Jennifer Egans *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, Tao Lins *Taipei* und Barbara Brownings *The Gift*, sind trotz der inhärenten Probleme des zwischenmenschlichen Austausches von einem intersubjektiven Gestus innerhalb der und – durch die Einbeziehung der Leser*innenschaft – durch die Literatur geprägt. Die Prosa im Zentrum dieser Arbeit ist sich ihres Status „nach der Postmoderne" bewusst und verhandelt Ironie (Distanz) und Aufrichtigkeit (Intimität) hinsichtlich der Frage, ob und wie sinnstiftende Beziehungen möglich sind in einer postfordistischen Gesellschaft, die gleichzeitig atomisiert und verbindet. Die Texte beleuchten somit den Widerspruch zwischen Verbergung und Offenbarung im Kern einer reflexiven Intimität, welche, im Gegensatz zu ihrer Vorläuferin, der romantischer Liebe, fortwährende Arbeit bedarf.

Die untersuchte Primärliteratur beleuchtet, wie materielle Bedingungen solche Dilemmata verschärfen können und lenkt somit Aufmerksamkeit auf die häufig übersehene ökonomische Bedingtheit von Intimität. Diese Dissertation kontextualisiert im Gegenzug mit den Mitteln des New Economic Criticism die kulturelle Hinwendung zur Intimität – in der Literaturwissenschaft beispielsweise in Form von „postcritique" (Postkritik) – sowohl als Symptom einer reflexiven Modernisierung (Beck) als auch als Reaktion auf aktuelle Herausforderungen für Literatur und Literaturwissenschaft. Angesichts der offensichtlichen Affinität zwischen dem explizit kommunikativen Impetus der hier analysierten Texte und soziologischen Diskursen über zeitgenössisch-kapitalistische Rhetorik der Fürsorge wird die Wiederkehr der Aufrichtigkeit sowohl vor dem Hintergrund des kommunikativen Fokus im Postfordismus als auch der Diskursgeschichte von Intimität analysiert.

Die Verhandlungen von Intimität in der zeitgenössischen Belletristik sind ergebnisoffen. Einerseits knüpft das Verlangen nach Intimität in der untersuchten Literatur an antimodernistische

Traditionen an, indem es nach individueller Entlastung von sozialen Missständen sucht, die einen solchen Eskapismus überhaupt erst nötig machen. Andererseits kann Literatur ihre Leser*innen durch Reflektion über entfremdendes in zwischenmenschlichen Situationen zuweilen zu jenen Überlegungen über die Veränderung von Sozialität anregen, die dem antimodernistischen Denken abgehen. Der Einsicht folgend, dass die Hinwendung zur Intimität ambivalente künstlerische Ergebnisse hervorbringt, widmet diese Dissertation jedem der vier ausgewählten Primärtexte ein eigenständiges Kapitel.

Appendix C: Vorveröffentlichungen

Aus dieser Dissertation sind folgende Vorveröffentlichungen hervorgegangen

1. Basierend auf früheren Versionen der Kapitel 2.4 und 2.5:

-- "US-Amerikanische Literaturwissenschaft Im Postfordismus: New Sincerity Trifft Postkritik." *Verabschiedungen Der "Postmoderne": Neuere Historisierungen Von "Theorie" Zwischen "Post-Truth"-Narrativen Und Generationengeschichte,* edited by Florian Scherübl, transcript, 2022, pp. 45–66.

2. Basierend auf einer frühen Version von Kapitel 3:

-- "'Quality Time' with David Foster Wallace: *The Pale King*'s Emotional Economy." *Work: The Labors of Language, Culture, and History in North America,* edited by J. Jesse Ramírez and Sixta Quaßdorf, Narr Francke Attempto, 2021, pp. 35–51. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 40.

Appendix D

Eggers, Fabian

Name, Vorname (bitte Druckschrift) Matrikelnummer

Erklärung zur Dissertation

mit dem Titel "Just the two of us, you and me."
Aesthetics and Economics of Intimacy in Contemporary American Fiction

1. Hiermit versichere ich,

   - dass ich die von mir vorgelegte Arbeit **selbständig** abgefasst habe, und
   - dass ich **keine weiteren Hilfsmittel** verwendet habe als diejenigen, die im Vorfeld explizit zugelassen und von mir angegeben wurden, und
   - dass ich die Stellen der Arbeit, die dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach anderen Werken (dazu zählen auch Internetquellen) entnommen sind, unter Angabe der Quelle kenntlich gemacht wurden, und
   - dass die Arbeit nicht schon einmal in einem früheren Promotionsverfahren angenommen oder abgelehnt wurde.

2. Mir ist bewusst,

   - dass Verstöße gegen die Grundsätze der Selbstständigkeit als Täuschung betrachtet und entsprechend der Promotionsordnung geahndet werden.

Berlin, 06.02.2023

Ort, Datum

Florian Scherübl (Hg.)

Verab-schiedungen der »Post-moderne«

Neuere Historisierungen von »Theorie« zwischen »Post-Truth«-Narrativen und Generationengeschichte

[transcript] Edition Kulturwissenschaft

Florian Scherübl (Hg.)

Verabschiedungen der »Postmoderne«

Neuere Historisierungen von »Theorie« zwischen »Post-Truth«-Narrativen und Generationengeschichte

[transcript]

Inhalt

US-Amerikanische Literaturwissenschaft im Postfordismus

New Sincerity trifft Postkritik

Fabian Eggers

1 Einleitung

In der theorieaffinen amerikanischen Belletristik und Literaturwissenschaft scheint die Zeit der Postmoderne vorüber zu sein. Statt der oft mit postmoderner Theorie und Literatur assoziierten Verspielt- und Selbstbezogenheit streben prominente Vertreter*innen beider Bereiche Formen der verlässlichen Kooperation zwischen Autor*in, Text und Leser*in an. Diese Neubewertung des Verhältnisses zum literarischen Text, so die These dieses Beitrags, korrespondiert mit zeitgenössischen, insbesondere postfordistischen Kommunikationsnormen der Arbeitswelt.

Zunächst zur Literatur: Obgleich die Debatte zur genauen Datierung des Endes der postmodernen Hegemonie weitergeht, herrscht weitgehender Konsens darüber, dass zahlreiche zeitgenössische Schriftsteller*innen sich von stereotypisch postmodernen Motiven wie ironischer Distanziertheit und emphatischer Selbstreferenzialität verabschiedet haben.[1] Eine der einflussreicheren Lesarten des wiedergefundenen Interesses an Zwischenmenschlichkeit in der amerikanischen Gegenwartsliteratur stellt die vorrangig von Adam Kelly theoretisch begründete *New Sincerity* (Neue Aufrichtigkeit) dar.[2] In teilweise expliziter Reaktion auf den schon zu Lebzeiten

1 Vgl. z.B. Holland, Mary: Succeeding Postmodernism. Language and Humanism in contemporary American Literature, New York: Bloomsbury 2013; Timmer, Nicoline: Do you feel it too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi 2010.

2 Kelly, Adam: »David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction«, in: David Hering (Hg.), Consider David Foster Wallace. Critical essays, Los Angeles/Austin:

einflussreichen David Foster Wallace erkunden zahlreiche Autor*innen die Limitierungen des Subjektstatus und daraus folgend die Möglichkeit einer mehr oder minder *aufrichtigen* Haltung gegenüber anderen. Diese Rückbesinnung auf Fragen des literarischen Realismus unter den Vorzeichen einer unübersichtlichen Gegenwart setzt sich dadurch vom oft anspruchsvollen Stil der literarischen Postmoderne ab, dass die Leser*innenschaft scheinbar vertrauensvoll adressiert und involviert wird. In ihrem Vertrauen in einen (mehr oder minder) Populären Realismus trotz – beziehungsweise, wie im Folgenden gezeigt wird, teils auch mithilfe – der fundamentalen Kritik des Poststrukturalismus an eben dieser Möglichkeit lässt sich die *New Sincerity* mit Moritz Baßler als eine Facette des »Neuen Midcult« verstehen.[3]

Die amerikanische Literaturwissenschaft erlebt eine geistesverwandte Debatte, in der einige das Erbe der postmodernen Theorie französischen Ursprungs, welche in den USA besonders wirkmächtig war und zum Teil weiterhin ist,[4] in analoger Weise hinterfragen. Vertreter*innen dieser postkritischen (»postcritical«) Denkschule beanstanden die ehemals dominanten, aber nun mitunter als unergiebig und abgehoben empfundenen Theorieschulen der Postmoderne und wollen diese durch intuitivere und vertrauensvollere

---

Sideshow Media Group Press 2010, S. 131-146. Dieser Beitrag verwendet aus zweierlei Gründen den englischen Begriff *New Sincerity* statt dessen deutscher Entsprechungen. Zunächst geht es im Folgenden fast in Gänze um Diskurse in der amerikanischen Literaturwissenschaft, in denen diese Bezeichnung etabliert ist. Im deutschsprachigen Feuilleton konkurriert dagegen die »Neue Ehrlichkeit« mit der präziseren Entsprechung »Neue Aufrichtigkeit.« Diese verschiedenen Versionen sind nicht das Resultat ungenauer Übersetzung, sondern deuten vielmehr die komplexen Begriffsgeschichten von »Aufrichtigkeit« und »Redlichkeit« an. Vgl. hierzu Tolksdorf, Nina: Performativität und Rhetorik der Redlichkeit. Nietzsche-Kleist-Kafka-Lasker-Schüler, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2020, S. 1-8. Darüber hinaus ist die *New Sincerity* ebenfalls von der »Neuen Innerlichkeit« bzw. »Neuen Subjektivität« zu unterscheiden, welche die Emphase des Privaten in der deutschsprachigen Literatur der späten 1960er und 70er meint. Während letztere eine Aufmerksamkeitsverschiebung hin zum eigenen Subjekt bezeichnet, richtet sich erstere dezidiert nach außen.

3 Baßler, Moritz: »Der Neue Midcult. Vom Wandel populärer Leserschaften als Herausforderung der Kritik«, in: Pop. Kultur und Kritik 18 (2021), S. 132-149. Die Betonung gegenseitigen Vertrauens bzw. sogar der Kollaboration zwischen Autor*in und Leser*in (Produktion und Rezeption), eine weitere Gemeinsamkeit zwischen *New Sincerity* und Neuem Midcult, kommt im dritten Teil dieses Aufsatzes zur Sprache.

4 Vgl. Cusset, François: French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008.

Interpretationsansätze ersetzen. Die unter anderem von Rita Felski angeführte Postkritik (*Postcritique*) schlägt beispielsweise vor, die angeblich zum Klischee verkommene Geste des Misstrauens mit affizierenden Formen des Lesens zu ersetzen, die dem lesenden Subjekt mehr Spielraum zugestehen.

Gemeinsam ist der *New Sincerity* und Postkritik die Emphase eines durch den Text vermittelten reziproken Vertrauens zwischen Autor*in, Text und Leser*in. In ihrer jeweiligen Neubeurteilung des Leseprozesses bevorzugen sie Zugänglichkeit und Nähe gegenüber jener Distanz, welche beispielsweise durch experimentelle Formen oder eine kritische Lesehaltung erzeugt wird. Erst in gemeinsamer Intimität werden Leser*in, Autor*in und Text zu kreativen Partner*innen. Diese auf flache Hierarchien, (hermeneutische) Arbeitsteilung und Flexibilität abzielende Rekonfiguration des Leseprozesses erinnert nicht zufällig an die Rhetorik des *Neuen Geist des Kapitalismus* nach Luc Boltanski und Ève Chiapello und kann,[5] so die im Folgenden entfaltete These, als Versuch der Aktualisierung und Aufwertung der (wissenschaftlichen Auseinandersetzung mit) Literatur im Postfordismus verstanden werden. Nach einer Einführung in die *New Sincerity* und einem kurzen Überblick über den Diskurs der Postkritik folgt eine abschließende Diskussion, welche die hier aufgeworfenen Gemeinsamkeiten ergründet.

2 *New Sincerity*

Die folgende Passage veranschaulicht den Diskussionsgegenstand *in medias res*:

> Nachdem Laura eine Margarita bestellt hatte, drehte sie hin und wieder den Kopf um neunzig Grad, um mit einem unsicheren, besorgten Gesichtsausdruck nach draußen zu starren – auf den Bürgersteig oder die unbelebte Straße –, wobei sie auf eine individuelle, unübliche Weise desorientiert und schüchtern wirkte, die Paul auf ein zugrunde liegendes Empfinden eines ›umfassenden, aber gescheiterten‹ Versuchs (im Gegensatz zum ›unvollständigen, aber erfolgreichen‹ Versuch der meisten Menschen) im Hinblick darauf, soziale Interaktion zu meistern, hinzuweisen schien, der sich aber, andächtig betrachtet, auch in genereller Hinsicht auf das Leben

5 Boltanski, Luc/Chiapello, Ève: The New Spirit of Capitalism, London: Verso 2007.

> beziehen konnte. Paul hatte diese Haltung in den vergangenen Jahren verstärkt als Persönlichkeitsmerkmal jeder einzelnen Person wahrgenommen, mit der er in etwa seit der Middleschool Freundschaft geschlossen hatte oder eine Beziehung eingegangen war (oder, wie ihm manchmal schien, auch nur ernsthaft interagiert hatte, ohne sich entfremdet oder verrückt vorzukommen).[6]

Diese Szene eines unbeholfenen Dates aus Tao Lins *Taipei* von 2013, hier in der deutschen Übersetzung *Taipeh* von 2014, steht stellvertretend sowohl für die Sehnsucht nach Zwischenmenschlichkeit in Lins Texten als auch für die zahlreichen Herausforderungen, die diesem Verlangen entgegenstehen. Die Passage wird durch die mäandernde Stimme des autobiografisch inspirierten Protagonisten Paul fokalisiert, der darüber nachsinnt, dass sowohl ihm als auch Laura die zur eleganten Navigation einer solchen Verabredung nötigen Soft Skills fehlen. Das die Situation dominierende Unbehagen manifestiert sich sprachlich in der Ruhelosigkeit der ungelenken, nicht enden wollenden Sätze und den zahllosen Einschüben. Aber gerade weil die beiden diese Inkompetenz gemein haben, wird das Defizit zur Keimzelle ihres gegenseitigen Vertrauens. Lauras »desorientierte« und »schüchterne« Haltung scheint sogar die Voraussetzung für Pauls Interesse an ihr zu sein. Ihre »individuelle, unübliche Weise« mag steif wirken, aber im Gegensatz zu den geläufigen Oberflächlichkeiten impliziert Lauras »›umfassender, aber gescheiterter‹ Versuch« einen Funken Authentizität. Paradoxerweise fühlt sich Paul also nur mit Menschen verbunden, die, so wie er auch, gerade durch ihre soziale Inkompetenz eine gewisse Transparenz und Vertrauenswürdigkeit ausstrahlen. Es ist wenig überraschend, dass Paul und Lauras soziale Untauglichkeit sie fortlaufend vor neue Probleme stellt, schon bald gehen sie wieder getrennte Wege. Diese Dynamik des Scheiterns ist repräsentativ für Lin, denn seine Texte kreisen fast durchgehend um die nicht bzw. nur unzulänglich überbrückbare Einsamkeit seiner Figuren.

Lins Stil ist überwiegend idiosynkratisch. Es ist jedoch festzuhalten, dass die in seinen Texten zentralen Versuche, existenzielle Einsamkeit im Alltagsleben zu überwinden und authentische Formen der Zwischenmenschlichkeit zu finden, von einer ganzen Reihe weiterer zeitgenössischer Autor*innen thematisiert werden. Neben Dave Eggers und Jennifer Egan, die zu Wallaces Generation zählen, ergründen beispielsweise auch Texte von Miranda July und

6 Lin, Tao: Taipeh, Köln: DuMont 2014, S. 36.

Ottessa Moshfegh regelmäßig die (Un-)Möglichkeit gegenwärtiger Zwischenmenschlichkeit.[7] Stilistisch haben die Texte dieser Autor*innen oft wenig gemeinsam, aber auch wenn die beschriebenen Versuche – wie in der zitierten Passage aus *Taipeh* – letztendlich scheitern, zeugen sie regelmäßig von dem Anliegen, Solipsismus und zwischenmenschliche Unterschiede zu überwinden und dem Gegenüber eine Hand entgegenzustrecken – beziehungsweise es wenigstens zu versuchen.

Dieses Gegenüber ist nicht selten die Leser*innenschaft. Ein geeignetes Beispiel hierfür ist der Roman *Then we came to an End* (*Wir waren unsterblich*), den Joshua Ferris 2007 vorgelegt hat. Die Geschichte über eine Werbeagentur während der Dotcom-Krise wird fast in Gänze in der ersten Person Plural erzählt, im kollektiven ›Wir‹ der um ihre Jobs bangenden Angestellten. Mit Ausnahme eines stilistisch eigenständigen Kapitels durchbricht lediglich der allerletzte Satz des Romans diese Erzählperspektive. Dort heißt es: »We were the only two left. Just the two of us, you and me.«[8] Das Romanende versichert der Leser*in rückwirkend ihre Zugehörigkeit zu eben jener Gemeinschaft, die im Zentrum der gesamten Handlung und Lektüre stand. Dabei kommt nicht nur eine spürbare Anerkennung zum Vorschein, sondern auch eine Sehnsucht nach gegenseitiger Wertschätzung. Solch einladende Rhetorik, oft kombiniert mit prominent inszenierten Autor*innenfiguren wie bei Lin und Wallace, erzeugen Ästhetiken der Intimität, die sich deutlich von postmodernen Techniken abgrenzen lassen. Wie bereits angedeutet ist dabei zunächst nebensächlich, ob das beschriebene Verlangen in Erfüllung geht. Vielmehr ist die Sehnsucht nach Zwischenmenschlichkeit unter widrigen Umständen von Interesse, denn wenn diese zum Großteil als beschädigt empfunden wird, scheint ›wahre Intimität‹, die wohl schon immer eine Fantasie war, von vorneherein ausgeschlossen.

Der Erfolg des noch jungen Lin, der sich zunächst mithilfe von Blogs und digitaler Selbstvermarktung einen Namen machte und dessen Bücher seit *Taipei* von namhaften Verlagen vertrieben und übersetzt werden, zeigt,

---

7 Vgl. exemplarisch: Eggers, Dave: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, New York: Simon & Schuster 2000; Egan, Jennifer: A Visit from the Goon Squad, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2010; July, Miranda: The First Bad Man, New York: Scribner 2015; Moshfegh, Ottessa: My Year of Rest and Relaxation, New York: Penguin 2018.

8 Ferris, Joshua: Then We Came to the End, New York: Back Bay Books 2007, S. 385. Kelly bespricht Ferris am Rande und nennt weitere Beispiele von scheinbar expliziter Leseransprache, vgl. A. Kelly: David Foster Wallace, S. 145-146.

dass die *New Sincerity* auch abseits der Kultfigur Wallace im Mainstream angekommen ist. Adam Kelly weist den Schriften von Wallace aus den frühen 1990er Jahren eine wegweisende Rolle für diese Entwicklung zu. Kelly zufolge nahm die Bedeutung von Aufrichtigkeit und Authentizität, deren jahrhundertelange Geschichte Lionel Trilling 1972 in seinem Grundlagenwerk *Sincerity and Authenticity* untersuchte,[9] im späten 20. Jahrhunderts rapide ab. Den Grund hierfür sieht er in der parallel wachsenden Vormachtstellung von postmoderner Theorie, wo diese die Möglichkeit stabiler Subjektformationen und damit die Voraussetzung sowohl für *authentische* Wahrhaftigkeit gegenüber sich selbst als auch die *aufrichtige* Haltung gegenüber anderen hinterfragte.[10] Als die Theorien von »Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co« Anfang der 1990er in den USA nahe ihres Zenits waren und für mitunter heftige Auseinandersetzungen auf universitären Campussen führten,[11] rückte Wallace Aufrichtigkeit als wiederentdeckte Tugend ins Zentrum seiner Literatur. Laut Kelly stellt dies jedoch keinen Rückschritt hinter die durchaus überzeugenden Einwände beispielsweise des Poststrukturalismus gegenüber althergebrachten, schlicht-dichotomen Subjektbegriffen dar.[12] In der Tat kennt Wallace den postmodernen Theorieapparat und seine vornehmliche Skepsis gegenüber dem gemeinschafts- und sinnstiftenden Potenzial sprachlicher Kommunikation genau. Nach jahrelanger Dominanz poststrukturalistischer Theorieschulen, welche Wallace und viele seiner (späteren) Mitstreiter*innen selbst im Studium erlebten, bedurfte es jedoch einer Neubewertung.[13] Dies bedeutet keinen Rückfall in die (literarische) Naivität. Vielmehr studierten, reflektierten und – beispielsweise in Bezug auf die (Un-)Möglichkeit aufrichtiger Zwischenmenschlichkeit – zweifelten sie an gewissen poststrukturalistischen Prämissen. Analog hierzu verhält es sich mit Wallaces Kritik postmoderner Literatur, deren ursprünglich subversive Stilmittel wie exzessive Selbstreferenzialität, Ironie

9 Trilling, Lionel: Sincerity and Authenticity, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2009.

10 A. Kelly: David Foster Wallace, S. 131-133.

11 Für einen konzisen Überblick vgl. F. Cusset: French Theory, xi-15.

12 Die poststrukturalistische Kritik hat für den Zeithorizont dieses Beitrags die größte Relevanz, jedoch verweist »Aufrichtigkeit« natürlich auf eine lange Begriffs- und Diskursgeschichte voller Zwickmühlen. Das Dilemma zwischen einem Verzicht auf im Zweifel manipulative Rhetorik und der nötigen Selbst-Markierung als eben aufrichtige Sprache bleibt, auch und besonders für literarische Texte, unauflösbar. Für einen Überblick vgl. N. Tolksdorf: Performativität und Rhetorik, S. 17-24.

13 Vgl. hierzu Dames, Nicholas: »The Theory Generation«, in: n+1 14 (2012), S. 157-169.

und die Hinterfragung moralischer Standards ihm zufolge von einer zunehmend beschleunigten Medienwelt sukzessive aufgesogen und neutralisiert wurden.[14] Auch hier zielt die Kritik nicht auf die bloße Abkehr von ihrem Gegenstand, sondern auf dessen Weiterentwicklung. Die als ethisch mittlerweile fragwürdig angesehene (sowie inflationär benutzte) Ironie wird nicht komplett abgelehnt, sondern zur ›Post-Ironie‹ weiterentwickelt, die den potenziell zynischen Gehalt ironischer Sprache explizit reflektiert, sprachliche Uneindeutigkeiten und Doppelbödigkeiten jedoch nicht aufgibt.[15] Diese Beispiele offenbaren die dialektische Verbindung zwischen *New Sincerity* und literarischer Postmoderne exemplarisch. Wie Mary Holland überzeugend darlegt, kann die Literatur von Wallace und stilverwandten Schriftsteller*innen in diesem Sinne sowohl als eine Gegenreaktion auf die Postmoderne als auch als deren Vollendung verstanden werden.[16]

In seinem oft als Manifest gelesenen Essay *E Unibus Pluram* von 1991 identifiziert Wallace die kulturelle Allgegenwärtigkeit des Fernsehens als Quelle ästhetischen Stillstands und ethischer Indifferenz:

> Seit mindestens zehn Jahren hat das Fernsehen jetzt auf geniale Weise genau die zynische postmoderne Ästhetik absorbiert, homogenisiert und reproduziert, die einst die einzige Alternative zu den Verlockungen der niederen Muse war, der leicht konsumierbaren Erzählungen des Massenmarkts.[17]

Das ehemals subversive Potenzial der Postmoderne verwandle sich so Stück für Stück in sarkastische Konformität, sodass »Ironie, schweigende Pokerfaces und Angst vor der Lächerlichkeit« die amerikanische Gegenwartskultur der frühen 1990er beherrschten.[18] Wallace beendet seinen Essay mit einem Ruf nach den »nächsten echten literarischen ›Rebellen.‹« Diese malt er sich

14 A. Kelly: David Foster Wallace, S. 134.

15 Vgl. Konstantinou, Lee: Cool characters. Irony and American Fiction, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2016; Hoffmann, Lukas: Postirony, Bielefeld: transcript 2016.

16 Vgl. M. Holland: Succeeding Postmodernism, S. 1-21. Diese Ambiguität erklärt nicht zuletzt, warum Texte der oben genannten Autor*innen im Feuilleton mal als dezidiert postmodern, mal als exemplarisch post-postmodern verstanden werden. Beide Perspektiven sind also nicht falsch, laufen aber Gefahr, die beschriebene Dialektik zu unterschlagen und der Komplexität dieser Texte damit nicht gerecht zu werden.

17 Foster Wallace, David: »E Unibus Pluram. Fernsehen und Literatur in den USA«, in: Ulrich Blumenbach (Hg.), Der Spaß an der Sache. Alle Essays, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 2018, S. 231-300, hier S. 267.

18 Ebd., S. 264.

als einen schrägen »Haufen von Antirebellen« aus, die »schlichte, alte, unmodische menschliche Nöte und Gefühle im Leben der USA voller Andacht und Überzeugung behandeln.« Ihr Heroismus läge in ihrem Willen begründet, sich zu unzweideutigen Werten zu bekennen, als »zu aufrichtig« zu gelten und damit Missfallen zu riskieren. Ihr Mut läge gerade in ihrer unerwarteten *Nicht*rebellion.[19]

Wallace plante seine literarische Karriere minutiös und kontinuierlich auf jene Vormachtstellung hin, die er einige Jahre später mit *Infinite Jest* (*Unendlicher Spaß*) tatsächlich einnahm.[20] Es ist insofern wenig verwunderlich, dass er diesen Aufruf letztendlich auf sich und sein Schaffen bezog. Kellys Verständnis nach liegt Wallaces Erneuerung des Begriffs der Aufrichtigkeit in der Literatur eine umgestaltete Beziehung zwischen Autor*in und Leser*in zugrunde.[21] Andernorts führt er aus:

> [I]n New Sincerity writing, the author and reader really do exist, which is to say they are not simply *implied*, not primarily to be understood as rhetorical constructions or immortalized placeholders. The text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time.[22]

Das Ziel der *New Sincerity*, der Leser*innenschaft in diesem Sinne nicht nur implizit die Hand auszustrecken und sie zur einer »kind of intimate conversation between two consciences« einzuladen, zieht jedoch ein Dilemma nach sich.[23] Wie lässt sich eine solche Geste *aufrichtig* in einer Kultur übermitteln, die, wie Wallace regelmäßig beklagte,[24] unter einer angeblichen Hegemonie von Ironie und Sarkasmus steht?[25] Autor*innen der *New Sincerity* erkennen

---

19 Ebd., S. 300.

20 Vgl. Boswell, Marshall: The Wallace Effect, New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2019, 1–12.

21 A. Kelly: David Foster Wallace, S. 146.

22 Kelly, Adam: »The New Sincerity«, in: Jason Gladstone/Andrew Hoberek/Daniel Worden (Hg.), Postmodern/Postwar and After. Rethinking American Literature, Iowa: University of Iowa Press 2016, S. 197-208, hier S. 206, Herv. i.O.

23 Lipsky, David: Although of course you end up becoming Yourself. A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace, New York: Penguin 2010, S. 289.

24 Vgl. auch McCaffery, Larry: »An interview with David Foster Wallace«, in: Review of Contemporary Fiction 13 (1993), S. 127-150.

25 Für eine ähnliche Frage vgl. A. Kelly: David Foster Wallace, S. 135.

dieses Dilemma nicht nur an, sondern lenken die Aufmerksamkeit ihrer Texte regelmäßig auf ebenjene ökonomischen und kulturellen Einflüsse, die Aufrichtigkeit scheinbar verunmöglichen – und damit auch ihr eigenes zentrales Anliegen.[26] Nach dem (künstlerischen) Selbstverständnis der *New Sincerity* hängt der Erfolg nun vom Mut ab, es trotzdem zu versuchen. Zwar räumt Wallace ein, dass in dieser Welt alle allein litten und »echte Empathie« unmöglich bleibe, betont jedoch direkt danach das »nahrhafte« und »erlösende« Potenzial literarischer Lektüre, welche diese universelle Einsamkeit zumindest lindern könne.[27]

Soll Aufrichtigkeit als solche erkannt und geglaubt werden, bedarf sie dementsprechend der vorbehaltlosen empathischen Geste sowie einer überzeugenden Darbietung derselben. Eben dieses darstellende Element ist von Interesse, denn Aufrichtigkeit verweist auf die performative Überbrückung der simplifizierten, aber wirkmächtigen Dichotomie zwischen innerer Gefühlslage und ihrer äußerlichen Artikulation. Konventionellen Definitionen zufolge, so schreiben Ernst van Alphen und Mieke Bal in *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*, bezeichne Aufrichtigkeit als »the performance of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it.«[28] Diese Perspektive weist erstaunliche Überschneidungen mit Arlie Russell Hochschilds Begriff der »Emotionsarbeit« auf, denn diese verlangt »to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in

26 A. Kelly: The New Sincerity, S. 205.

27 L. McCaffery: An interview with, S. 127.

28 Die in dieser Definition implizierte Spaltung zwischen Subjekt-Oberfläche und -Innerlichkeit stehe wiederum mit der Einheit dieser Sphären in Konflikt, welche Aufrichtigkeit eigentlich kennzeichne. Van Alphen und Bal wollen eben diese produktiven Spannungen herausarbeiten, anstatt das Konzept der Aufrichtigkeit mit dem Verweis auf »a vulgarized and misunderstood ›postmodern irony‹« pauschal abzutun. Eine solche Ablehnung wäre problematisch angesichts »the ongoing, crucial political and cultural function of speech acts that have been associated with sincerity (such as vows and oaths) or its absence […] A different analysis and evaluation of such speech acts – the idea that performance overrules expression – must not be mistaken for a naïve dismissal of these acts as ›just‹ play. The undeniable presence and persistence of these acts co-exist, instead, with a transformed conception of subjectivity, a transformed idea of what we believe today to be sincere behavior or expression.« In ihrem Plädoyer für ein in Sprechakten verankertes »transformiertes Konzept« der Aufrichtigkeit versuchen van Alphen und Bal, Aufrichtigkeit also mit einem performativen Begriff der Subjektivität zu verbinden. Ernst van Alphen/Mieke Bal/C. E. Smith (Hg.): The Rhetoric of Sincerity, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009, S. 3-5.

others.«[29] Hochschild erarbeitete den Begriff in einer 1983 erschienen Studie zu den emotionalen Anforderungen an Flugbegleiterinnen, er lässt sich jedoch auch auf zwischenmenschliche Begegnungen außerhalb der Lohnarbeit beziehen. Gerade in der postfordistischen Gesellschaft, in welcher Soft Skills oft genauso wichtig sind wie fachliche Expertise, lässt sich Aufrichtigkeit also durchaus als eine Form der Emotionsarbeit verstehen. Diese Analogie hilft bei der Historisierung von Wallaces Hinterfragung des ästhetischen und ethischen Werts der oft mit postmoderner Ästhetik assoziierten Gefühlskälte. Seine Kritik an den Stilmitteln der Distanziertheit – Ironie, Zynismus, Nihilismus – begehrt gegen die Herabsetzung oder gar Verleugnung von Gefühlen auf. Zugespitzt formuliert wehrt sich Wallace gegen das *American Cool*, mit dem der Emotionshistoriker Peter Stearns die im Laufe des 20. Jahrhundert zunehmend restriktive Normierung von Gefühlsäußerungen sowohl in privaten wie auch beruflichen Kontexten auf den Begriff bringt.[30]

Ironische Distanz beruht auf kühler Affektkontrolle.[31] Aufrichtigkeit, verstanden als das Bestreben solche Signale auszusenden, die vom Gegenüber entsprechend ihrer Intention interpretiert werden sollen, verlangt das Gegenteil. Glaubt der oder die Adressat*in dieser performativen Rhetorik an eine »congruence between avowal and actual feeling,« dies Trillings Definition von Aufrichtigkeit,[32] entsteht ein Intimitätseffekt im Sinne einer vertrauensvollen Gegenseitigkeit zwischen Leser*in und Autor*in.[33] Die Diskussion über Wallaces Beschäftigung mit dem Antagonismus von Ironie und Aufrichtigkeit kann dementsprechend wie folgt erweitert werden: Sein Plädoyer für

29 Hochschild, Arlie R.: The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feeling, Berkeley: University of California Press 1983, S. 7.

30 Vgl. Stearns, Peter N.: American Cool. Constructing a Twentieth Century Emotional Style, New York: New York University Press 1994.

31 Vgl. Ulla Haselstein/Irmela Hijiya-Kirschnereit/Catrin Gersdorf/Elena Giannoulis (Hg.): The cultural Career of Coolness. Discourses and Practices of Affect Control in European Antiquity, the United States, and Japan, Lanham: Lexington Books 2013.

32 L. Trilling: Sincerity and Authenticity, S. 2.

33 Hierbei ist anzumerken, dass dieses Bestreben die *New Sincerity* im Sinne einer Dialektik nur noch fester an die Rationalisierung der Emotionen bindet. Die beschriebene »Wiederbelebung« der Emotionen in der Literatur wird ermöglicht durch minutiöse und reflexive Beobachtung – die unschwer als Technik der Instrumentalisierung erkennbar ist. Weil dieses reflexive Dilemma keinen Ausweg kennt, sollte die *New Sincerity* nicht dafür kritisiert werden, das Ideal des »reinen Gefühls« nicht einlösen zu können. Jedoch bedarf ihre (Selbst)darstellung einer kritischen Einordnung.

Aufrichtigkeit, Ehrlichkeit und Empathie passt zweifelsohne zu dem Bestreben, die oft mit der postmodernen Ästhetik verbundene Gefühlskälte zu kritisieren, es fügt sich jedoch ebenso in die Geschichte der Instrumentalisierung von Emotionen ein. Die Soziologin Eva Illouz beobachtet beispielsweise eine Ausformung und Verfestigung tradierter sozialer Strukturen durch die Regulierung und Kommodifizierung von Emotionen. Ihr zufolge haben sich im Laufe des 20. Jahrhunderts die ökonomischen und emotionalen Sphären in den westlichen Gesellschaften soweit überlagert, dass beispielsweise psychologische Normen und therapeutische Paradigmen die zwischenmenschlichen Kommunikation in allen Lebensbereichen beeinflussen. Illouz argumentiert mit Bezug auf Pierre Bourdieu, dass die erforderlichen Techniken für einen kompetenten Umgang mit der Schnittmenge von emotionaler und ökonomischer Sphäre habitusbildend seien. Darüber hinaus könne die »emotionale Kompetenz,« also das geschickte Navigieren der Schnittmengen beider Sphären, wiederum als »emotionales Kapital« genutzt werden, das Illouz als einen Mechanismus der sozialen Stratifizierung interpretiert.[34] Nicht zuletzt werden diese Kenntnisse überwiegend in der Mittelschicht erworben, wo die Bedeutung von Selbstreflexion, Manipulation und vor allem der eigenen Außenwirkung früh vermittelt wird. Die Folge ist die Abgrenzung dieser ›emotional Gebildeten‹ von jenen, die diese Techniken nie erlernt haben.

Der Übergang zu beispielsweise Wallaces Literatur fiele an dieser Stelle leicht. Viele seiner Romanfiguren werden von einem instrumentalisierten Verhältnis zur eigenen Gefühlswelt, permanenter Selbstüberwachung und Selbstentfremdung geplagt. Doch statt einer Analyse zur Funktion von rhetorisch konstruierter Nähe zwischen Leser*in und dem »Emotionsarbeiter« Wallace[35] folgt hier eine Perspektivumkehrung, denn die Betrachtung der akademisch einflussreichen Denkschule der Postkritik kann dabei helfen eine parallele Rhetorik der Intimität in der Literaturtheorie zu beleuchten.

---

34 Illouz, Eva: Saving the Modern Soul. Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help, Berkeley: University of California Press 2008, S. 214.

35 Vgl. hierzu Eggers, Fabian: »›Quality Time‹ with David Foster Wallace. The Pale King's Emotional Economy«, in: Jesse Ramirez/Sixta Quassdorf (Hg.), Work. The Labors of Language, Culture, and History in North America, Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag 2021, S. 35-52.

3 Postkritik

In den vergangenen zwei Jahrzehnten mehren sich Forderungen innerhalb der amerikanischen Literaturwissenschaften, etablierte Formen der Kritik als Methode zu revidieren und intuitivere und empfindsamere Begegnungen mit literarischen Texten zu ermöglichen. Schon 2004 fragt der einflussreiche Wissenschaftsforscher Bruno Latour polemisch *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?* und beklagt, dass Kritik als Methode nicht nur ihre emanzipatorische Kraft verloren hätte, sondern die dazugehörige Rhetorik von Verschwörungstheoretiker*innen und andere dubiosen Akteur*innen vereinnahmt würde.[36] In ähnlicher Weise beschäftigt sich die Literaturtheorie mit den *Limits of Critique*, wie ein vielbeachteter Titel von Rita Felski andeutet, deren Interventionen die Postkritik geprägt haben.[37] In diesem oft polemischen Diskurs wird dabei nur selten benannt, von welchen Formen der Kritik genau es sich gälte abzuwenden. Felski arbeitet sich vornehmlich an der von Paul Ricœur in Bezug auf Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx und Friedrich Nietzsche so benannten ›Hermeneutik des Verdachts‹ ab, welche für verschiedene poststrukturalistische Ansätze grundlegend ist, hinterfragt aber auch feministische Ansätze der Literaturwissenschaften mithilfe derer sie einst selbst ganze Bücher füllte. Das von Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus vorgeschlagene ›Surface Reading‹ (Oberflächenlesen), auf das hier nur am Rande eingegangen werden kann, argumentiert hingegen konkret gegen Fredric Jameson und sein angeblich nicht mehr zeitgemäßes Misstrauen gegenüber textlichen oder kulturellen Oberflächen.[38] Jameson ist der wohl prominenteste Vertreter eines zeitgenössischen Marxismus in der amerikanischen Geisteswissenschaft. Gemeinsam ist fast allen Beiträgen dieser Art jedoch ein gewisser Theorieüberdruss, der sich nach den vergangenen theorieschwangeren Jahrzehnten als Krisensymptom verstehen lässt.

Felskis *Uses of Literature* (2008) bietet einen geeigneten Einstieg in die Debatte. Im Laufe der letzten Jahrzehnte, so argumentiert sie, hat die Literaturwissenschaft eine mehr oder weniger uniforme Haltung des Misstrauens

36 Latour, Bruno: »Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern«, in: Critical Inquiry 30 (2004), S. 225-248, hier S. 225.

37 Vgl. Felski, Rita: The Limits of Critique, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2015.

38 Vgl. Best, Stephen/Marcus, Sharon: »Surface Reading: An Introduction«, in: Representations 108 (2009), S. 1-21.

gegenüber literarischen Texten entwickelt, die der Inszenierung eines Idealbildes der klugen Kritiker*in dient, aber der individuellen Komplexität des jeweiligen Textes keine Rechnung trägt und einer sinnstiftenden Begegnung mit ihm eher im Weg steht. Felskis Anliegen ist es, die Kluft zwischen der akademischen Behandlung von Literatur und ihrem laienhaften Äquivalent zu überbrücken. Sie bezieht sich dabei zwar auf phänomenologische Denkschulen, distanziert sich aber beispielsweise explizit von der Rezeptionsästhetik der Konstanzer Schule, weil diese ein Idealbild der akademischen Leser*in vorrausetze und damit die individuell abweichenden Reaktionen der Leser*innen außer Acht lasse. Ihr gehe es aber genau um diese vielfältigen Formen einer »Mikroästhetik,« bei der das Resultat einer jeden Lektüre offenbleibe.[39]

In *The Limits of Critique* (2015) verschiebt Felski den Fokus von den Potenzialen intuitiver Rezeptionshaltungen hin zu den angeblich beschränkten Perspektiven professioneller Leser*innen. Es geht ihr nun darum, was Literaturwissenschaftler*innen (nicht) tun sollten. Konkret kritisiert sie jene im geisteswissenschaftlichen Wissenschaftsbetrieb verbreiteten selbstgefällig-kritischen Posen, die durch allgegenwärtige Skepsis und eine radikale Rhetorik gekennzeichnet sind und denen zufolge alles, was nicht kritisch ist, *un*kritisch sein müsse.[40] Angesichts der außerhalb der Universitäten dominanten Lesegewohnheiten versucht Felski nun die Sackgassen der Kritik hinter sich zu lassen und die Literaturwissenschaft neu auszurichten: »What if critique were limited, not limitless; if it were finite and fallible; if we conceded that it does some things well and other things poorly or not at all?«[41] Statt der formelhaften Anwendung irgendeines kritischen Verfahrens, das lediglich das Dogma der Skepsis wiederhole, plädiert sie für die Rückkehr zur intuitiven Interpretation ohne Scheuklappen. Denn im Gegensatz zu den angeblich abgehobenen Diskursen, die Felski kritisiert, könne die Rückbesinnung auf individuelle Leseerfahrungen den Literaturwissenschaften inmitten des wachsenden institutionellen Legitimitätsdrucks ihr Überleben sichern.[42] Angesichts ihrer zunehmenden Abwertung haben die Geisteswissenschaften in einer marktorientierten Gesellschaft Mühe, sich zu behaupten. Dabei steht die Literaturwissenschaft besonders unter Rechtfertigungsdruck: »Why, after all, should

39 Felski, Rita: Uses of Literature, Oxford: Blackwell 2008, S. 133.

40 R. Felski: The Limits of Critique, S. 2.

41 Ebd., S. 8.

42 Ebd., S. 9-10.

anyone care about literature?«[43] Felski formuliert ihre Antwort, indem sie ihre neophänomenologische »Mikroästhetik« mit Hilfe der Actor-Network-Theorie (ANT) theoretisiert. Literarische Texte seien nicht auf ihre historischen Kontexte zu reduzieren, sondern als transhistorische Agent*innen anzuerkennen. So könnten Texte als nicht-menschliche Akteur*innen konzeptualisiert werden, die, ähnlich wie ihre Leser*innen, nie allein sind, sondern immer in einem sich ständig weiterentwickelnden Diskurs mit ihrem Netzwerk stehen.[44]

Felski verweist auf die französischen Kritiker*innen Marielle Macé und Yves Citton, die einen Kompromissvorschlag zum Hermeneutik-Begriff unterbreiten. Hier sei ein Text »no longer a monument to dead thought (*histoire*) nor a self-referential web of linguistic signs (*écriture*).«[45] Durch ihre Referenz auf die ANT umgeht Felski nicht nur die potenziellen methodologischen Probleme, welche die Betonung der Komplexität individueller Lektüreerfahrungen mit sich bringt, sondern auch die wiederkehrende Frage nach Selbst- und Fremdbestimmung. Da die ANT jedem Akteur/Aktant, also auch der Leser*innenschaft, ein gewisses Maß an Handlungsfähigkeit zugesteht, kann Felski diese aus der schwachen Position der ewigen Unterwerfung »retten«, die ihnen durch die ihrer Meinung nach formelhafte und wenig überzeugende Applizierung einer hermeneutischen Kritik zugewiesen wird. Umgekehrt gewährt sie den Leser*innen Handlungsfähigkeit durch unvorhersehbare und unkontrollierbare Affekte, ohne einen simplifizierten Subjektbegriff rehabilitieren zu müssen.[46] Die Betonung von individuellen und volatilen Lesereaktionen stellt einen Kompromiss dar, der Felski hilft, ihr Hauptargument gegen die Standardisierung – und für die Revitalisierung – des Umgangs mit Literatur voranzutreiben. Ihr Projekt lässt sich mit Winfried Fluck wie folgt zusammenfassen:

> The reader, shaken out of her routine and brought back to life, has regained her singularity, one that, contrary to the formulaic practice of *critique*, can no

43 Ebd., S. 14.

44 Ebd., 156–178. Freilich stellt sich die Frage, warum Felski für diese heutzutage wohl selbstverständliche Einsicht die Hilfe der Actor-Network-Theory in Anspruch nehmen muss.

45 Ebd., S. 175, Herv. i.O.

46 Fluck, Winfried: »The Limits of Critique and the Affordances of Form: Literary Studies after the Hermeneutics of Suspicion«, in: American Literary History 31 (2019), S. 229-248, hier S. 235.

> longer be trapped in a predictable plot. Singularity is the normative base of an approach that aims to escape routinization.[47]

Es geht Felski und ihren Mitstreiter*innen also darum, die einzigartige Begegnung zwischen Leser*in und Text im Akt des Lesens wieder in den literaturwissenschaftlichen Fokus zu rücken. Jedoch ist dieser Standpunkt nicht neu und kann bereits in Susan Sontags kurzer Polemik *Against Interpretation* nachgelesen werden.[48] Darüber hinaus stellt sich natürlich die Frage, wie viel Freiheit oder Innovation diese Aussicht tatsächlich mit sich bringt. Außerhalb des Lektüreseminars konnten Lai*innen Texte schon immer so lesen, wie es ihnen gefiel, und diese Prozesse haben zu Recht analytische Betrachtung erfahren.[49] Bruce Robbins macht des Weiteren darauf aufmerksam, wie die Postkritik die Rhetorik von Selbsthilfe- und Verbraucherdiskursen nachahmt und damit eine Form der Rezeption produziert, die eher der von Fangemeinden als von Wissenschaftler*innen ähnelt.[50] Ebenfalls bleibt unklar, wie Postkritik als Methode tatsächlich aussehen würde. Merve Emre merkt hierzu an, dass die Befürworter*innen der Postkritik wohl nicht zufällig abstrakte Metaphern, Versprechen und Hoffnungen gegenüber konkreten Vorschlägen bevorzugen.[51] Obwohl diese methodologischen Einwände gegenüber der Postkritik gewichtig sind, geht es im Folgenden jedoch um die beachtliche

47 Ebd., S. 238, Herv. i.O.

48 Sontag, Susan: Against Interpretation, London: Vintage Books 2007. Ähnliches ließe sich über die frühe strukturalistische Semiotik von Roland Barthes sagen. Obwohl Felski ihn mutmaßlich als ›kritischen Leser‹ einordnen würde, nicht zuletzt ist er eine wichtige Inspiration im postmodernen Theorieapparat, lässt sich bei Barthes ebenfalls der Wunsch nach Autonomie für das lesende Subjekt finden. Umgekehrt muss festgestellt werden, dass die Postkritik sich in ihrem Einspruch gegen poststrukturalistische Exzesse über eine Vielzahl von Einsprüchen aus Feminismus, Black- und Queer Studies ausschweigt, die schon vor Jahrzehnten Nivellierungen des Subjekt-Begriffs oder übertriebenes Misstrauen als Lektürehaltung kritisierten. Vgl. exemplarisch hooks, bell: »Postmodern Blackness«, in: Vincent B. Leitch/William E. Cain/Laurie A. Finke (Hg.), The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2010, S. 2509-2516 sowie Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve: Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2003, S. 123-151.

49 Vgl. exemplarisch Radway, Janice A.: Reading the Romance. Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, Chapel Hill/London: The University of North Carolina Press 1991.

50 Robbins, Bruce: »Critical Correctness«, in: Chronicle of Higher Education 65 (2019).

51 Emre, Merve: Paraliterary. The making of bad readers in postwar America, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press 2017, S. 255.

Kompatibilität zwischen der postkritischen Emphase einzigartiger Lektüreerfahrungen und den rhetorischen Angeboten der *New Sincerity*.

4 Schluss: Ein gutes Team

Vergegenwärtigt man sich den kommunikativen Impetus der eingangs besprochenen Literatur der *New Sincerity*, offenbart sich eine deutliche Analogie zur Postkritik. Auf der einen Seite hinterfragen Schriftsteller*innen die Einsichten poststrukturalistischer Theorie sowie den Wert postmoderner Selbstbezogenheit und versuchen das Vertrauen in die verbindenden Potenziale der Sprache (wieder) herzustellen. Texte der *New Sincerity* bedienen sich hierzu regelmäßig einer Rhetorik der Transparenz und streben eine empathische Beziehung zur Leser*innenschaft an. Das Streben nach intersubjektiver Verbindung und Kommunikation, welches laut Nicoline Timmer zentraler Bestandteil des *Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction* ist,[52] bedarf keinerlei textueller Ausgrabung – es findet sich direkt an der Oberfläche. Die vertrauensvolle Rhetorik der *New Sincerity* setzt voraus, dass die Leser*innen nicht »tief« im Text »graben,« um etwas Verborgenes zu bergen, oder von ihm »zurücktreten,« um die eigene Perspektive zu hinterfragen.[53] Kritisches Misstrauen würde die offenherzige Haltung der Texte vielmehr unterlaufen, ihr kommunikatives Bestreben hemmen und letztendlich das gesamte literarische – und ethische – Anliegen sabotieren.

Auf der anderen Seite plädiert die Postkritik für einen intuitiveren Zugang zu und eine Hingabe an Texte statt einer Hinterfragung der eigenen Reaktionen und Affekte, ganz als ob sie das Angebot der *New Sincerity* explizit annähme. Neben Felskis Vorschlägen ist das bereits kurz erwähnte ›Surface Reading‹ (Oberflächenlesen) von Best und Marcus ein prägnantes Beispiel: Ihr für wissenschaftliche Standards bescheidenes Bestreben, anzuzeigen, was ein literarischer Text über sich selbst aussagt, ist Ausdruck eben jenes Vertrauens, das die *New Sincerity* ihren Leser*innen abverlangt.[54] Felski wiederum vergleicht das Verhältnis zwischen Text und Leser*in mit einem Balletttanz: Der Akt des Lesens ähnele einem »›pas de deux,‹ an interplay between text and person that refuses the false choice of autonomous aesthetics or instrumental

52 N. Timmer: Do you feel, S. 13.

53 Vgl. R. Felski: The Limits of Critique, S. 52-84.

54 S. Best/S. Marcus: Surface Reading, S. 11.

politics.«[55] Die Tanzmetapher offenbart die große Bedeutung von gegenseitigem Vertrauen und Intimität: Nur wenn beide Seiten einander führen und folgen, Impulse geben und empfangen, entsteht die sowohl für *New Sincerity* als auch Postkritik wesentliche Harmonie. Die Vertrauenswürdigkeit von (textlichen) Oberflächen ist Prämisse für beide Ansätze. Sowohl *New Sincerity* als auch Postkritik werben in gegenseitiger Ergänzung für eine aufrichtige Beziehung zwischen Leser*in, Autor*in und Text, welche formal-ästhetische Verschleierung ebenso wie kritische Distanz ablehnt. Stattdessen wird ein gegenseitiges Entgegenkommen betont: Leser*in und Text sind vertrauensvolle Partner*innen, die gemeinsam daraufhin arbeiten, ein intimes *Dazwischen* zu schaffen. Der Leseprozess wird hier jeweils betont kooperativ verstanden, die Arbeit gerecht geteilt. Diese Partnerschaft impliziert eine antihierarchische Revision der Lesemilieus, die professionelle Leser*innen mit Lai*innen gleichsetzt. Es besteht keine Notwendigkeit, mit akribischer Aufmerksamkeit dem nachzuspüren, was ein Text verbirgt – es könnte sogar hinderlich sein. Anders als bei der skeptischen Lesehaltung, die Felski beklagt, ist das Lesen hier ein kooperativer Prozess zwischen Gleichgestellten und idealerweise auch Gleichgesinnten.

Die Affekttheorie beschreibt diese Prozesse des Dazwischen mitunter als »affektive Intensitäten.« Rainer Mühlhoff und Jan Slaby zufolge sind letztere in solchen Situationen erlebbar, deren Affektgewirr fesselnd wirkt und die sich dadurch merklich von ihren weniger intensiven Umgebung unterscheiden. Die höchste Entsprechung dieser Intensitäten liegt in der Immersion, deren Erfahrungsspektrum von Unbehagen und Konzentration bis zur momentanen Verschmelzung von Subjekt und Umfeld reicht, bei der sich der oder die Leser*in völlig auf die Lektüreerfahrung einlässt.[56] Dieses Spektrum eignet sich zur groben Zusammenfassung dessen, wie sich die Postkritik Beziehungen zu literarischen Texten vorstellt, nämlich als singuläre Begegnungen mit stets ungeahnten Auswirkungen. Jede einzelne Lektüre jedes einzelnen Romans kann ein lebensveränderndes Geflecht affektiver Beziehungen entstehen lassen. Dieses Potenzial ist allgegenwärtig und für jeden verfügbar, wenn man sich Texten nur mit einer aufrichtig offenen Haltung nähert und

55 R. Felski: The Limits of Critique, S. 176.

56 Mühlhoff, Rainer/Slaby, Jan: »Immersion at Work. Affect and Power in post-Fordist Work Cultures«, in: Birgitt Röttger-Rössler/Jan Slaby (Hg.), Affect in relation. Families, places, technologies, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2018, S. 155-174, hier S. 160.

mitarbeitet.[57] Mühlhoff/Slaby weisen nicht zufällig darauf hin, dass solch immersive Teamarbeit dem heutigen Ideal kollaborativer Arbeitsarrangements entspricht. Die von Postkritik und *New Sincerity* befürwortete Zusammenarbeit kann in der Tat als Versuch interpretiert werden, den Status und Nutzen von Literatur im Postfordismus gesellschaftlich zu erneuern. Nicht zuletzt fällt die Forderung nach Dialog und Gemeinschaft sowie die Abkehr von den »Routinen der Kritik« hin zu einzigartigen Leseerfahrungen mit einer Legimitationskrise der Geisteswissenschaften zusammen. Wie bereits angedeutet, rahmt Felski ihre Intervention mit genau diesem Krisenbewusstsein. In einer Gesellschaft, die zunehmend positivistisches Wissen schätzt, muss sich die Auseinandersetzung mit Literatur aufs Neue legitimieren.[58] Inmitten des wachsenden Drucks auf die institutionalisierte Literatur(kritik) unternimmt die Postkritik einen solchen Legitimationsversuch durch ihre Aufmerksamkeit für singuläre Beziehungen zwischen Leser*in und Text.

Während diese institutionellen Dynamiken nicht zu leugnen sind, lassen sich die diskutierten Ähnlichkeiten zwischen *New Sincerity* und Postkritik auch gesamtgesellschaftlich deuten. Wie Boltanski und Chiapello sowie andere Theoretiker*innen des zeitgenössischen Kapitalismus betonen, hat sich der Rationalisierungstrieb im Postfordismus weiterentwickelt, um menschlichere, subtilere und gerade wegen dieser Subtilität aggressive Mechanismen disziplinarischer Macht zu schaffen.[59] Wenn das Subjekt nicht mehr von großen Institutionen geprägt wird, sondern sich auf dem Marktplatz der Persönlichkeiten der postindustriellen Ökonomie und individuell selbst kuratieren muss, gewinnen immaterielle Werte wie ›Netzwerke‹ oder ›emotionales Kapital‹ an Bedeutung. Die von Andreas Reckwitz portraitierte *Gesellschaft der*

57 Auch dieser Aspekt der Postkritik hat ihre Vorläufer. Im Sinne von literarischen Texten, die Mitarbeit einfordern, hat Espen J. Aarseth schon 1997 von »ergodischer Literatur« gesprochen. Unter anderem in Referenz zu Aarseth entwickelte Marie-Laure Ryan ihre Theorie zu »The Poetics of Immersion« und »The Poetics of Interactivity« und setzte sich mit dem aus der analytischen Philosophie kommenden Ansatz der »Possible Worlds« und ihren Potenzialen für die Narratologie auseinander. Vgl. Aarseth, Espen J.: Cybertext. Perspectives on ergodic literature, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1997; Ryan, Marie-Laure: Narrative as Virtual Reality. Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2001; Ryan, Marie-Laure: the living handbook of narratology. Possible Worlds: https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/54.html

58 R. Felski: Uses of Literature, S. 2.

59 L. Boltanski/È. Chiapello: The New Spirit, S. 98.

Singularitäten erhebt den Wert besonderer, ungewöhnlicher oder einzigartiger Erlebnisse sogar zum kulturellen Maßstab.[60]

Felski drängt darauf, die öde Verwaltung von Texten durch akademische Autoritätsfiguren durch einen Lesemodus zu ersetzen, der die aufregenden Potenziale der Literatur für alle betont, die sich auf ein immersives Erlebnis einlassen. In ihrer Emphase von Individualität und experimenteller Unsicherheit tritt die Postkritik tendenziell für eine Form des *unternehmerischen Lesens* ein. Befreit von den Regeln etablierter Formen der Kritik, kann sich der oder die Leser*in auf einen Austausch mit offenem Ende einlassen. Es mag übertrieben sein, die Postkritik mit einer »kreativen Zerstörung« im Sinne Joseph Schumpeters zu assoziieren, und sie dem volatilen Markt akademischer Trends gegenüberzustellen. Der Vergleich zeigt aber auf, wie ihre Intervention etablierte und manchmal behäbige Ansätze der Literaturwissenschaft mit einer ›deregulierten‹ Art des Lesens unter Druck setzt, die allen ein Versprechen auf Singularität gibt. Von den Routinen der Kritik befreit, kann sich der oder die Leser*in auf einen Austausch mit offenem Ende einlassen. Da dieses Unterfangen mitunter anspruchsvoll und verwirrend geraten kann, kommt es nur gelegen, dass die *New Sincerity* die Leser*innenschaft vertrauensvoll an die Hand nimmt.

Literatur

Aarseth, Espen J.: Cybertext. Perspectives on ergodic literature, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1997.

Baßler, Moritz: »Der Neue Midcult. Vom Wandel populärer Leseschaften als Herausforderung der Kritik«, in: Pop. Kultur und Kritik 18 (2021), S. 132-149.

Best, Stephen/Marcus, Sharon: »Surface Reading: An Introduction«, in: Representations 108 (2009), S. 1-21.

60 Reckwitz, Andreas: Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2017. So schreibt der eingangs zitierte Tao Lin nicht nur idiosynkratische Literatur, die in ihrem Streben nach Intimität trotz aller Affektverweigerung eine hohe Eigenkomplexität aufweist. Darüber hinaus ist er als Autorenfigur mit jahrelang intensiv gepflegter Internetpräsenz im permanenten Austausch mit seinen Fans, denen seine Nahbarkeit ein ›einzigartiges‹ Lektüreerlebnis seiner Texte ermöglicht.

Boltanski, Luc/Chiapello, Ève: The New Spirit of Capitalism, London: Verso 2007.

Boswell, Marshall: The Wallace Effect, New York: Bloomsbury Academic 2019.

Cusset, François: French Theory. How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2008.

Dames, Nicholas: »The Theory Generation«, in: n+1 14 (2012), S. 157-169.

Egan, Jennifer: A Visit from the Goon Squad, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 2010.

Eggers, Dave: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius, New York: Simon & Schuster 2000.

Eggers, Fabian: »›Quality Time‹ with David Foster Wallace. The Pale King's Emotional Economy«, in: Jesse Ramirez/Sixta Quassdorf (Hg.), Work. The Labors of Language, Culture, and History in North America, Tübingen: Narr Francke Attempto Verlag 2021, S. 35-52.

Emre, Merve: Paraliterary. The making of bad readers in postwar America, Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press 2017.

Felski, Rita: Uses of Literature, Oxford: Blackwell 2008.

Felski, Rita: The Limits of Critique, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 2015.

Ferris, Joshua: Then We Came to the End, New York: Back Bay Books 2007.

Fluck, Winfried: »The Limits of Critique and the Affordances of Form: Literary Studies after the Hermeneutics of Suspicion«, in: American Literary History 31 (2019), S. 229-248.

Haselstein, Ulla/Hijiya-Kirschnereit, Irmela/Gersdorf, Catrin/Giannoulis, Elena (Hg.): The cultural Career of Coolness. Discourses and Practices of Affect Control in European Antiquity, the United States, and Japan, Lanham: Lexington Books 2013.

Hochschild, Arlie R.: The Managed Heart. Commercialization of Human Feeling, Berkeley: University of California Press 1983.

Hoffmann, Lukas: Postirony, Bielefeld: transcript 2016.

Holland, Mary: Succeeding Postmodernism. Language and Humanism in contemporary American Literature, New York: Bloomsbury 2013.

hooks, bell: »Postmodern Blackness«, in: Vincent B. Leitch/William E. Cain/Laurie A. Finke (Hg.), The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism, New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2010, S. 2509-2516.

Illouz, Eva: Saving the Modern Soul. Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help, Berkeley: University of California Press 2008.

July, Miranda: The First Bad Man, New York: Scribner 2015.

Kelly, Adam: »David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction«, in: David Hering (Hg.), Consider David Foster Wallace. Critical essays, Los Angeles/Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press 2010, S. 131-146.

Kelly, Adam: »The New Sincerity«, in: Jason Gladstone/Andrew Hoberek/Daniel Worden (Hg.), Postmodern/Postwar and After. Rethinking American Literature, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press 2016, S. 197-208.

Konstantinou, Lee: Cool characters. Irony and American Fiction, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 2016.

Kosofsky Sedgwick, Eve: Touching Feeling. Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity, Durham/London: Duke University Press 2003.

Latour, Bruno: »Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern«, in: Critical Inquiry 30 (2004), S. 225-248.

Lin, Tao: Taipeh, Köln: DuMont 2014.

Lipsky, David: Although of course you end up becoming Yourself. a Road Trip with David Foster Wallace, New York: Penguin 2010.

McCaffery, Larry: »An interview with David Foster Wallace«, in: Review of Contemporary Fiction 13 (1993), S. 127-150.

Moshfegh, Ottessa: My Year of Rest and Relaxation, New York: Penguin Press 2018.

Mühlhoff, Rainer/Slaby, Jan: »Immersion at Work. Affect and Power in post-Fordist Work Cultures«, in: Birgitt Röttger-Rössler/Jan Slaby (Hg.), Affect in relation. Families, places, technologies, London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group 2018, S. 155-174.

Radway, Janice A.: Reading the Romance. Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, Chapel Hill/London: The University of North Carolina Press 1991.

Reckwitz, Andreas: Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2017.

Robbins, Bruce: »Critical Correctness«, in: Chronicle of Higher Education 65 (2019).

Ryan, Marie-Laure: Narrative as Virtual Reality. Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 2001.

Ryan, Marie-Laure: the living handbook of narratology. Possible Worlds: https://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/node/54.html

Sontag, Susan: Against Interpretation, London: Vintage Books 2007 [1966].

Stearns, Peter N.: American Cool. Constructing a Twentieth Century Emotional Style, New York: New York University Press 1994.

Timmer, Nicoline: Do you feel it too? The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium, Amsterdam/New York: Rodopi 2010.

Tolksdorf, Nina: Performativität und Rhetorik der Redlichkeit. Nietzsche-Kleist-Kafka-Lasker-Schüler, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2020.

Trilling, Lionel: Sincerity and Authenticity, Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2009.

van Alphen, Ernst/Bal, Mieke/Smith, C. E. (Hg.): The Rhetoric of Sincerity, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009.

Wallace, David F. : »E Unibus Pluram. Fernsehen und Literatur in den USA«, in: Ulrich Blumenbach (Hg.), Der Spaß an der Sache. Alle Essays, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch 2018, S. 231-300.

Work: The Labors of Language, Culture, and History in North America, edited by J. Jesse Ramírez and Sixta Quaßdorf, Narr Francke Attempto, 2021, pp. 35-51. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 40.

Table of Contents

"Quality Time" with David Foster Wallace: *The Pale King's* Emotional Economy

Fabian Eggers

David Foster Wallace's posthumous *The Pale King* (2011) is often read as an insightful commentary on the wide-ranging economic and ideological changes felt in the post-Fordist workplace throughout the 1980s, as a novel whose deliberation of bureaucratic structures, civic virtue, and concrete labor may defy capitalism's contemporary emphasis on flexibility. However, the text's interest in the *emotional* complications arising from this process warrants more attention. This chapter brings two disconnected strains of Wallace Studies into dialogue by combining an analysis of the novel's underlying emotional economy with a historicization of Wallace's programmatic "New Sincerity." Throughout *The Pale King*, a palpable authorial persona mandates his readers to labor through the incoherent text. In exchange, he offers a sense of "sincere" compassion and intimacy by addressing his middle-class readership's anxieties about an increasingly contingent labor market. As this chapter argues, *The Pale King* speaks to the intersubjective complexities of its readers' daily lives and offers narrative "quality time" as a form of acknowledgment for their intellectual labor. This perspective firstly helps to explore certain affinities between Wallace's writing and post-Fordist management techniques and, secondly, contextualize its remarkable commercial success and critical acclaim.

Keywords: New Sincerity, post-Fordism, emotion, bureaucracy, David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*

Set in an Internal Revenue Service (IRS) office complex in the spring of 1985, David Foster Wallace's posthumous *The Pale King* (2011; henceforth *TPK*) deliberates on the momentous post-Fordist transformation gripping the U.S. at the time, as well as on the individual and institutional consequences that went along with it. *TPK* emphasizes two socio-economic implications of its setting. On the one side, an ominous "Spackman Initiative" channels the spirit of the bureaucracy-loathing Reagan administration through its propagation of "an increasing anti- or post-bureaucratic mentality" (81 n19); the reader learns that "the question was whether and to what extent the IRS should be operated like a for-profit business" (85). On the other side, advanced computation threatens the job security of the novel's IRS employees. Ranging from dry tax code to confessional narrative, the fragmentary novel conveys both abstract tedium and human contingency in an institutional setting. It is no surprise then that the novel is often read as a commentary on the economic and ideological upheavals throughout the 1980s. Established perspectives on *TPK* interpret its interest in bureaucracy as an artistic statement on neoliberal governance (Godden and Szalay), as recovering a sense of humanism amidst the bureaucratic sublime (Boswell; Severs), or even as outlining the possible shape of a present-day communist novel (Shapiro). Though the criticism is wide-ranging, many scholars understand *TPK's* focus on the potential links between bureaucratic structures, civic virtue, and rewarding labor as resistance to contemporary capitalism's mandate of total flexibility.

While the following argument has an economic focus as well, the emphasis lies on a different and frequently misrepresented exchange system in Wallace's writing. In addition to its exploration of the economic transformation of U.S. American society, the novel shows an acute awareness of the growing instrumentalization of emotions in both private and professional contexts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. In fact, *TPK* performatively deliberates the interpersonal adjustments mandated by this process through its careful mediation of the (implied) relationship between reader and author. By combining economic criticism through an analysis of *TPK's* underlying emotional economy with Wallace's reputation as spearheading "New Sincerity," this chapter brings two disconnected strains of Wallace Studies into dialogue. As will be demonstrated, the writer's authorial persona mandates the readers to establish meaning in his incoherent novel.[1] In exchange, he offers a sense of *sincere*

[1] As a posthumous novel, *TPK* begs the question of what it would have looked like if Wallace had finished it. While this can of course only be answered in a speculative fashion,

intimacy by competently acknowledging the anxieties created by an increasingly contingent labor market. Through this narrative form of "emotional labor" (Hochschild), *TPK's* rhetoric evokes and performs certain dynamics of "emotional capitalism" (Illouz). This finding suggests that Wallace's complaints about industrial society's alienating tendencies conceal the fact that his texts excel at navigating this society's communicative challenges.

This chapter first historicizes Wallace's well-known concern with irony and sincerity in the post-Fordist context; it then discusses one of *TPK's* most prominent characters—"David Wallace," who claims to be the author—and eventually analyzes the labor of reading *TPK*. As will be shown, the novel's thematic focus, its formal incoherence, and Wallace's relationship to the reader converge in a rather conservative poetics about the value of tedious work, an insight that troubles interpretations praising *TPK's* subversive potential.

New Sincerity's Emotional Labor

Adam Kelly's seminal argument regarding Wallace and "New Sincerity" helps to explore the writer's emphatic relationship to the reader. Kelly understands Wallace's interest in the time-honored category of sincerity as evolutionary, meaning that his (re)turn to sincerity does not resurrect simple surface/depth models. Instead, it is the outcome of a careful study of postmodernist fiction and a media-saturated society ("Wallace" 134), both of which, according to Wallace, came to be corrupted by hegemonic irony. For Kelly, Wallace reconfigures the "writer-reader relationship" and preserves "a love of truth, a truth now associated with the possibility of a reconceived, and renewed, sincerity" (146) so that author and reader are not merely implied. Instead, "[t]he text's existence depends not only on a writer but also on a particular reader at a particular place and time" ("New Sincerity" 206). But how does one successfully convey sincerity in a culture which, according to Wallace's lament, is dominated by ironic detachment and dishonesty?

---

it is clear that Wallace not only left an unfinished novel in the sense that he did not live to finalize it. Much like the works he published during his lifetime, *TPK* mandates its readers to put in their share of work. Wallace's editor, Michael Pietsch, reports in a note preceding the novel how Wallace "referred to the novel as 'tornadic' or having a 'tornado feeling,'" (xii) indicating both force and pace. This guiding imagery helps to explain the text's fragmentation, for its middle is comparatively empty. *TPK* has no clear protagonists, but numerous characters surrounding the IRS. In addition, many characters do not interact but merely orbit the novel's focal point side by side.

New Sincerity writers are often seen as not only conscious of the various economic and cultural structures jeopardizing any attempt at sincerity, but as drawing explicit attention to the effects of these influences on their own writing (Kelly, "New Sincerity"; Konstantinou). Consequently, their artistic success depends on the courage to try nevertheless; to give a persuading *performance*. Conventional definitions frame sincerity as "the performance of an inner state on one's outer surface so that others can witness it" (van Alphen et al. 3), a notion remarkably similar to "emotional labor," which requires one "to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others" (Hochschild 7).[2] This link helps to explore sincerity's resurgence against the backdrop of changing labor demands in recent decades. When the post-Fordist transformation in the U.S. moved jobs from the factory to offices, shops, and the service sector, demands on the workforce changed accordingly. C. Wright Mills's early prediction of a "shift from skills with things to skills with persons" is borne out by more recent scholarship (182). The influential sociologist Eva Illouz describes the gradual convergence of economic and emotional spheres during the 20th century. This development is exemplified by the tacit job requirement of "emotional competence" (214), meaning the skilled negotiation of the perpetually changing emotional disposition and affective dynamics of oneself and others.[3] When the labor market treats empathy as a valuable soft skill, sincerity becomes a similar asset.

"Quality Time" with the "Author"

In the post-Fordist context, Wallace's grappling with sincerity thus appears as a timely challenge to the emotional chill associated with postmodern aesthetics and industrial modernity's labor regimes. Whereas postmodern irony shares its reliance on cooled-down affect with Fordist

---

[2] Arlie Russel Hochschild's groundbreaking *The Managed Heart* assumes the "authentic" self to be gradually lost through estranging emotional labor, a view that must be questioned after countless scholars of the performative turn have stressed the importance of *practice* to the constitution of the self. Both van Alphen et al. and Kelly recognize the problems with this surface/depth dichotomy, but observe a similar, though certainly more complicated, opposition in the lived reality of many—and in Wallace's writing.

[3] Adapting Pierre Bourdieu, Illouz describes "emotional capital" to stratify society by showing how members of the working class are inhibited from rising to management positions in part because they have only restricted access to the therapeutic "field" in which they could develop an instrumental "ability to understand others and to handle human relations in general" (69, 222–235).

labor principles, sincerity's urge to reveal yourself speaks to both emotional capitalism's paradoxical order to *be yourself* at work (Fleming and Sturdy; Illouz) as well as the current valorization of singularity (Reckwitz). Correspondingly, a sense of intimacy can emerge with the promise of mutual understanding and affection when Wallace's reader, the addressee of this sincere rhetoric, perceives "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" in his texts (Trilling 2). Notably, its emphatic emotionality dialectically ties New Sincerity (further) to the control—indeed rationalization—of emotions. Its reflexivization of cooled-down affect might enable a "thawing," but because only a *strategic* rhetoric of emotions can work toward this end, it simultaneously represents a form of instrumentalization. Since this reflexive trap offers no escape, New Sincerity writing cannot be blamed for a failure to achieve the aporia of "pure" emotions. But neither should its self-presentation be taken at face value, as is not unusual within debates about New Sincerity.

Today, the intimacy promised by New Sincerity frequently comes in the form of "quality time." The OED defines this post-Fordist term—its first listed citation dates from 1972—as "time spent in a worthwhile or dedicated manner," for example, time spent with one's family. Quality time's antagonist, "real time," in turn signifies the apparent coincidence of an event with its registration, processing, and representation through information technology. In contrast to such technological velocity, quality time suggests the "intimacy" of "analogue, face-to-face, intersubjective attention" (McGurl 213). The more dominant real time restricts and conditions quality time, but conversely also prompts a growing demand for respite. Although an accelerated society is "hostile to the pleasant longueurs of human intimacy, let alone serious reading" (218), literature offers one way to evade the bustle of real time and indulge in a moment of rest and comfort. Of course, not every kind of literature is geared toward this effect, and Wallace's exacting texts themselves do not appear comforting at first. However, his invitation to "a kind of intimate conversation between two consciences" clearly responds to this transformed demand for intimacy (qtd. in Lipsky 289). As will be shown, the offered quality time is dialectically tied to (an aesthetic rendering of) real time and conditioned by readerly labor.

TPK contains numerous passages intended to evoke intimacy through intricate descriptions of the emotionally charged situations and contradictions that the knowledge workers of the American middle class endure. As is common for Wallace's oeuvre, instrumentalized interiorities, self-conscious feedback loops, and a sense of alienation plague many of the novel's characters, virtually all of whom are IRS bureaucrats and helpless

when it comes to the management of such tensions. The novel offers plenty of (inter)personal breakdowns: before a second character is introduced, the reader observes over twenty-eight pages how personnel manager Claude Sylvanshine's self-consciousness spirals into a nervous breakdown. Conversely, the communicative insecurities of Chris Fogle render his digressive conversion story from young "wastoid" to responsible accountant both incoherent and unreasonably long—at 101 pages, his tale amounts to a self-contained novella full of redundancies; and IRS trainee David Cusk's compulsive mental feedback loops about his fear of sweating only exacerbate his problem.

"David Wallace" has similar communicative problems. Though he can express himself adequately, he is hard-pressed to explain the sublime bureaucratic forces determining every aspect of his life. The character first appears in the novel's ninth chapter, "Author's Foreword," wherein he claims to be "the real author […] not some abstract persona" (68). As the novel's most prominent character, not only due to his urgent claims of non-fictionality, "Wallace" states that "[t]his book is really true" and maintains that "[t]he only bona fide 'fiction' here is the copyright page's disclaimer" (69–70). In the three supposedly autobiographical chapters about his stint as an IRS rote worker, "Wallace" addresses the reader directly and relies on an intimate rhetoric that sets itself apart from *TPK's* abstract chapters on legal reform and tax codes.

In the conventional understanding, intimacy thrives on the least possible mediation. But "Wallace's" insight that he "obviously need[s] to explain" his paradoxical claim to authorship reflects New Sincerity's self-awareness (69). Advising his readers to "flip back and look at the book's legal disclaimer," he states:

> I need you to read it, the disclaimer, and to understand that its initial 'The characters and events in this book…' includes this very Author's Foreword. In other words, this Foreword is defined by the disclaimer as itself fictional, meaning that it lies within the area of special legal protection established by that disclaimer. I need this legal protection in order to inform you that what follows is, in reality, not fiction at all, but substantially true and accurate. That—*The Pale King* is, in point of fact, more like a memoir than any kind of made-up story. (69)

The intimate appeal of "Wallace's" narrative is facilitated by an acknowledgment of various layers of mediation and the character's request for help. Though "there's always a kind of unspoken contract between a book's author and its reader" (75), "Wallace" seeks to transcend such arrangements. He "need[s] you," the reader, to flip to the

front of the book, and the "special […] protection" he seeks exceeds mere legal matters. "Wallace" is desperate for the comfort that the earnest reciprocity between reader and "writer" can facilitate. Indeed, he finds "these sorts of cute, self-referential paradoxes irksome, too" (69) and admits his dependence on, to recall Kelly again, "a particular reader at a particular place and time" ("New Sincerity" 206). Much like the empirical author's nonfiction, the "Wallace" chapters contain numerous lengthy footnotes in which the character emphasizes his lack of autonomy. At one point, he apologizes for a vague sentence, tellingly about his presumed "veracity" and the "mutual contract" between him and the reader, stating that it "is the product of much haggling and compromise with the publisher's legal team" (75, 75 fn. 10). In other similar gestures, "Wallace" seeks to establish his credibility by addressing the misleading qualities of human memory and some of his editorial choices. The description of his commute to the IRS is complemented, for example, by a note attesting to the difficulty of taking "coherent notes in a moving auto" (278 fn. 25).

Through such metafictional play, Wallace—the empirical author—imitates the alienating tendencies and struggles of a writer's work environment during the publishing industry's "Conglomerate Era" (Sinykin). That *TPK's* "Foreword" is not found at the book's beginning, but, due to "yet another spasm of last-minute caution on the part of the publisher," has "been moved seventy-nine pages into the text," underscores his self-presentation as being helplessly controlled by larger powers. When the reader follows "Wallace's" prompt to "see below," the page number varies with each edition but never matches the stated page "seventy-nine" (69 fn. 2). Although the character recounts what he purports to be his life story, he remains ignorant of its layout and page count. Both as low-level IRS employee and writer, "Wallace" occupies what Mills described as the awkward middle position of white-collar workers and, as such, is representative of *TPK's* concern for common employees ruled by sublime regulation. A plot point about his misidentification by the IRS administration with a *second* "David Wallace" is not only another instance of the text's self-referentiality (297 fn. 48), but also demonstrates how "Wallace" is stuck in the middle of bureaucracy's contradictory forces. Even as a renowned author who invested "three years' hard labor (plus an additional fifteen months of legal and editorial futzing)" for his supposed memoir, "Wallace" remains a proverbial cog in the machine—of the publishing industry (84).

"Wallace's" restlessness speaks to the vanishing distinction between play and work under post-Fordism. Befitting Sianne Ngai's theorization

of the "zany," he personifies a hyperactive mode of "incessant activity," frantic adaptation, and emotional intensity in a labor-intensive performance—be it play, work, or indistinguishable (Ngai 185). Ngai observes that, unlike related modes, such as goofy or silly, zaniness connotes a sense of desperation that negates comic relief; the zany subject wants too much and tries too hard: "the unhappily striving wannabe, poser, arriviste. The utter antithesis of ironic cool, the perspiring, overheated zany is a social loser" (189). Indeed, "Wallace" and many of his awkward colleagues try very hard, but their unfocused hyperactivity ultimately prevents them from achieving anything at all. The anxiety-driven zany exemplifies Wallace's aesthetic reaction to what he perceived as postmodernism's aloofness. In its awkwardness, the zany represents a form of pitiable helplessness incompatible with cool detachment. Ngai highlights the affinity of zaniness to *The New Spirit of Capitalism* as theorized by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello. In opposition to earlier formations of capitalism that valued (Weberian) "rational asceticism" or, later on, "responsibility and knowledge," capitalism's current constellation rewards mere activity, be it in professional or private contexts. "To be doing something, to move, to change," Boltanski and Chiapello explain, "this is what enjoys prestige, as against stability, which is often regarded as synonymous with inaction" (155). "Wallace" ambivalently embodies this post-Fordist demand in both form and content. In the narrative's emulation of real time, he undergoes endless communicative efforts to explain his powerlessness—without a chance to overcome it.

Hectic "Wallace" is evidently unable to enjoy, let alone offer the "pleasant longueurs" of quality time. But behind this character, recognizable as such despite his urgent claims to the contrary, not least due to the ghosts and psychics populating his "nonfiction," the reader senses an authorial interlocutor who *does* in fact offer an "intimate conversation." But this dialogue is conditioned on an exchange. To tap the novel's connecting potential, the readers must labor and make sense of its fragmentary form and at times tedious content. Only once they have endured this can they indulge in Wallace's promised intimacy.

The Labor of Reading Wallace

In a similar fashion to how many of the characters draw profound insights from their everyday tedium at the IRS, intellectual labor is central to the reading experience of *TPK*. In a convergence of form and content, the novel formally reinforces its thematic focus on bureaucratic abstraction

through its diverse fragments of varying length and readability. The numerous footnotes of "Wallace's" chapters illustrate this point. Many of them do not only contain helpful information for grasping *TPK's* multiple narrative strands but in turn develop self-contained narratives on their own. Others appear in the middle of the often seemingly endless sentences and force the reader to part ways with one train of thought or miss another, thus fragmenting the reading process itself. Through the footnotes' small size in most editions, *TPK* formally affirms the narrative's wisdom about the value of small print. But it is important to note that these demands on the reader are balanced by intermittent perspectives on the human elements populating the bureaucratic machine. Small talk between shifts and dreadful commutes function as moments of respite in the reading process and receive as much narrative attention as the tedious intricacies of tax legislation (89).

Nevertheless, *TPK* indulges in an aesthetics of excess and, much like Wallace's most lauded fiction, remains a difficult read. Complex plots with countless characters (many mysterious, some nameless), confusing narratives with an overwhelming amount of information, much of it absurd and ostensibly irrelevant or difficult, sometimes impossible to decipher: these are, after all, the well-known and much-admired characteristics of Wallace's fiction. His texts resist easy consumption by focusing on uninteresting or unpleasant themes. Passages discussing the "ACIRHRMSOEAPO Survey/Study" on "syndromes/symptoms associated with Examinations postings in excess of 36 months" (89) surely fit the category of "cruft" in that their only discernible function lies in the masking of other meaningful passages, thus challenging the reader's attentional capacity (Letzler).

Given Wallace's thoughts on the difficulty of creating and consuming meaningful art in an age of alleged hegemonic irony and narcissism, some view such obstacles as serving Wallace's dialogic poetics by defamiliarizing his readers in order to then enable a more meaningful intellectual exchange (Timmer 77; Hering 162). But this understanding overlooks the narrow expectations underlying this exchange. Much like in the contract "Wallace" seeks to escape, the readers cannot engage in a free dialogue; instead, they must meet defined expectations. This might be a peculiar description of reading a novel, but it points to the framework of institutional discipline in Wallace's relationship with the reader. A brief look at how Wallace thought about his magnum opus *Infinite Jest* is informative here. Asked about its apparent lack of an ending, he once replied:

> There is an ending as far as I'm concerned. Certain kind[s] of parallel lines are supposed to start converging in such a way that an "end" can be projected by the reader somewhere beyond the right frame. If no such convergence or projection occurred to you, then the book's failed for you. (qtd. in Max 321 n19)

Wallace frames his text as a problem the reader/student solves and then submits to the author/instructor for review, and he barely veils his expectation: if "the book's failed for you," you have in turn not only failed the book, *but also Wallace*. Of course, such "exams" remain metaphorical, but the contractual logic underlying Wallace's writing nevertheless exercises a deep-seated pressure. The readers sense that he "is playing at a high level, that he has thought of everything, and that we'll be playing catch-up (Taranto). After all, this is the author who once stated that some contemporary writers "are involved in transactions requiring genius, but it seems to me to be sort of required on both sides" (qtd. in Kelly, "Wallace" 146). Though Kelly takes note of the statement's economic overtone, "reading is a transaction, an economy like any other in which goods are sold and received," he supposes "the gift of sincerity" to somehow offset this logic (ibid.). Wallace's biographer Daniel T. Max likewise states that *Infinite Jest*, "for all its putative difficulty, cares about the reader, and if it denies him or her a conventional ending, it doesn't do so out of malice; it does it out of concern, to provide a deeper palliative than realistic storytelling can" (215). Advocating a version of the Protestant work ethic, Max argues that "you have to work to get better. The book is redemptive, as modern novels rarely are" (ibid.). An understanding of what Wallace's literature is about—in his oft-quoted words, "what it is to be a fucking *human being*" (qtd. in McCaffery 131, emphasis in original)—appears to be premised on enduring hard work.

Indeed, the readers' effort to fulfill their contract with Wallace and labor through the novel's long stretches of tedious technicalities appears to *be* their reward. Wallace's writes in a note for *TPK*: "It turns out that bliss—a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom" (548). This idiosyncratic insight amounts to *TPK's* central moral: Chris Fogle converts to life as an accountant after an epiphany about the "heroism" and civic virtue of dull and complex work. "Wallace" asserts that the "real reason why U.S. citizens were/are not aware" of the momentous changes in the IRS his "memoir" describes "is that the whole subject of tax policy and administration is dull. Massively, spectacularly dull" (85). Even the IRS's fictional motto—"*He is the one doing a difficult, unpopular job*"—confirms the importance of enduring tedium for a greater good (246,

emphasis in original). In a key scene, DeWitt Glendenning, Jr., the novel's only character who is neither seeking the approval of others nor ridiculed by narrative irony, monologizes on the shifting perspective on what citizenship means:

> We've changed the way we think of ourselves as citizens. We don't think of ourselves as citizens in the old sense of being small parts of something larger and infinitely more important to which we have serious responsibilities. We do still think of ourselves as citizens in the sense of being beneficiaries […] Something has happened where we've decided on a personal level that it's all right to abdicate our individual responsibility to the common good and let government worry about the common good while we all go about our individual self-interested business and struggle to gratify our various appetites. (138)

When his interlocutor remarks how this topic makes for dull conversation, Glendenning responds: "Sometimes what's important is dull. Sometimes it's work. Sometimes the important things aren't works of art for your entertainment" (140). Glendenning's role as the author's literary mouthpiece become obvious here, not least because Wallace promoted such virtues in almost identical terms (*This is Water* 120). Constructing a suitable analogy through taxes, the novel renders the endurance of tedious or inconvenient labor as serving both the individual as well as the collective good. In line with its apotheosis of strenuous work, *TPK* demands resilience against boredom and abstraction from its readers.

Such demands beg the question why so many accept the challenge of this often overwhelming and confusing literature. Encounters between text and reader are contingent and not all of Wallace's readers partake in the afore described exam logic (Finn 171). But as the numerous reading circles and fandom websites devoted to Wallace attest, his celebration of hard work still appeals. As a towering literary figure, he emphasized the open dialectic between text and reader while simultaneously carefully shaping the exchange. In contrast to his clumsy characters, Wallace conveyed his message about the merits of discipline and endurance with success. John Holliday's understanding of "authorial connectedness" illustrates how style and reception converge in this respect. Once it succeeds, authorial connectedness makes the reader "feel as though you are engaging with the thoughts of a person whose beliefs and attitudes intersect with yours, whose personality you find mesmerizing, and who expresses content you value and does so in a way that you believe you would if you could" (10). Many of Wallace's readers appear to share this reading experience and, in some cases, this perceived proximity extends

into a fantasy of actual friendship or other kinds of intimacy with the actual writer (Fitzpatrick). It thus emerges that Wallace's eloquent complaints about the colonization and corruption of interpersonal exchanges by current soft skills regimes concealed his personal mastery of the very communicative proficiencies they require. By anticipating his readers' emotional disposition and combining this anticipation with the (mediated) interpersonal skill of openly communicating about them, Wallace's authorial persona reveals himself to be an excellent emotional laborer. Central is the very discomfort his texts intimate about the contemporary state of interpersonal exchanges: *TPK* abounds with what appears as the uncomfortable honesty and frequent self-deprecation of almost all characters. Most male characters, for instance, are shy introverts who fail to live up to the standard of traditional male role models.

Many of *TPK's* helpless characters are subject to the rule of larger (if mundane) powers. Conversely, the intimacy emanating from "authorial connectedness" is produced by "the reader recognizing something of herself in the work, something she believed or thought or felt before reading the work, for authorial connectedness turns on the reader feeling as though she has found […] a fellow soul" (Holliday 3). It is unsurprising then that Wallace's credible portrait of everyday white-collar grievances, combined with his emotional reflexivity and fine sense of humor, not only speaks to many of his readers but consoles them as well. For here is an author who accurately describes the stress arising from human interactions (not only in the professional context), the fragmentation of one's (office) work and private life, the difficulty of remaining sane in the ever-accelerating real time. An author, in other words, whose emotional labor "produces the proper state of mind" in his readers to facilitate quality time for them. In turn, their intellectual labor is rewarded with a sense of intimacy. This effect has both narcissistic and nostalgic elements: the readers ultimately recognize an idea of *themselves*, so that their empathetic enlightenment can be seen to be self-involved and limited. Moreover, Wallace facilitates this identification by pastoralizing the dreary but secure work environment of bureaucracy at a time when capitalist structures eschew stable hierarchies and favor flexibility (Dorson). On behalf of its readers, *TPK* symbolically reconciles the incompatible contradictions dominating their (work) lives.

A Managed Community

In a wider context, Wallace's talent can be seen as a contemporary literary expression of what management historians Daniel Wren and Arthur G. Bedeian once identified in the burgeoning notion of human relations, namely "a new mix of managerial skills […] crucial to handling human situations: first diagnostic skills in understanding human behavior and second, interpersonal skill in counseling, motivating, leading, and communicating" (298). Alexander Styhre's investigation of what Wallace "can teach Management Scholars" is a suitable example of this conjecture between the writer's painstaking observations on the estranging tendencies of present-day (work) relations and organizational psychology. Befitting the essay's publishing venue in the *Academy of Management Review*, Styhre seeks to discern how Wallace's writing might inspire more engaging language in management studies. His praise for Wallace's meticulous focus on what at first appears banal as well as the promotion of what Styhre, with reference to Aristotle's understanding of *eudaimonia*, summarizes as "happiness based on a modest way of life," help to explore the managerial affinities inherent in Wallace's writing (170). Styhre writes that Wallace invites management scholars to "reinvent and reform the language at hand in order to better capture the individuals populating organizations and engaging in management practices. The work of Wallace can inspire new ways to capture everyday life in organizations" (173). Notwithstanding a leap in genre—Styhre bases his claim on Wallace's idiosyncratic nonfiction (176)—this interest in Wallace's ability to valorize the boring by devoting empathetic attention to it and thereby to recognize the reader's often mundane daily grind bespeaks *TPK's* therapeutic potential. The implied belief that institutions, such as the IRS at the novel's center (or the corporations Styhre studies), are suited to build a community among its workers indicates a modest view on what this community might achieve. Conversely, it exposes readings that praise the novel's insights on how to "replace the individual liberty of selfishness in favour of a selflessness in service of collective emancipation" to be overly enthusiastic (Shapiro 1268). More accurately, *TPK* echoes what Wendy Brown calls a "national-theological discourse" of moralized, individual sacrifice to the collective good. Personal duty is proposed as the solution to political crisis, as opposed to debate, contestation, or even "collective emancipation." Though the novel conveys obvious discontent with the intensification of economic and social individualization, its reliance on personal ethics to bring about meaningful change burdens the

individual further—and troubles readings of *TPK* as defying neoliberal paradigms.

By way of conclusion, it can be said that the readers' intimate relationship to an author who knows and understands their alienating experiences in everyday life goes a long way toward explaining the fairly homogenous make-up of Wallace's audience. Many scholars, as well as the author himself, presume his readership to be mostly young, educated, and of a white middle-class background (e.g., Lipsky 82). If practices of intimacy such as the quality time of reading a novel are emotional capitalism's "training grounds" and get distributed unevenly along class lines (Illouz), the vast academic discourse accompanying Wallace should not be surprising either. The fact that it is a privilege to have the time and disposition to carefully read a difficult novel is of course not to be blamed on Wallace. Conversely, his (scholarly) readership *should* reflect this when making larger claims about his work. Given academia's social exclusivity, the ever-growing group of scholars working on Wallace might, except for age, closely resemble his presumed readership. Critics frequently confirm Wallace's communicative skills and emotional competence by declaring a "special relationship" with him. For example, Nicoline Timmer's *Do You Feel It Too?,* an insightful study on the "Post-Postmodern Syndrome" in recent U.S. American fiction, includes an "In Memoriam" for Wallace in which she thanks him "for being such a wonderful, hyper-intelligent, hypersensitive (and also extremely funny) interlocutor in all his work" (10). Another indicator for Wallace's communicative success is the degree to which, until today, scholarship on him relies so heavily on his own interpretations of his fiction: his "sincerity manifesto" of 1993 and the lengthy interview with Larry McCaffery of the same year shaped the scholarship for years to come. The sheer number of quotes by Wallace within scholarly discourse shows that he knew very well how to make his point—and that his insights found an appreciative audience.

In one of his many digressions, *TPK's* Chris Fogle remarks: "If you really look at something, you can almost always tell what type of wage structure the person who made it was on" (184). To the many devoted readers who labor through the novel with the goal to eventually recognize and appreciate Wallace's empathy for middle-class discontent, the statement marks as a self-referential milestone along the way toward their "intimate conversation."

References

Boltanski, Luc and Ève Chiapello. *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Verso, 2007.

Boswell, Marshall. "Author Here: The Legal Fiction of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*." *English Studies* 95 (2014): 25–39.

Brown, Wendy. "Sacrificial Citizenship: Neoliberalism, Human Capital, and Austerity Politics." *Constellations* 23 (2016): 3–14.

Dorson, James. "The Neoliberal Machine in the Bureaucratic Garden: Pastoral States of Mind in David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*." *Rereading the Machine in the Garden: Nature and Technology in American Culture*. Ed. Eric Erbacher, Nicole Maruo-Schröder and Florian Sedlmeier. Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 2014. 211–30.

Finn, Ed. "Becoming Yourself: The Afterlife of Reception." *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012. 151–76.

Fitzpatrick, Kathleen. "Infinite Summer: Reading, Empathy, and the Social Network." *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace*. Ed. Samuel Cohen and Lee Konstantinou. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012. 182–207.

Fleming, Peter and Andrew Sturdy. "'Being yourself ' in the electronic sweatshop: New forms of normative control." *Human Relations* 64 (2011): 177–200.

Godden, Richard and Michael Szalay. "The Bodies in the Bubble: David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*." *Textual Practice* 28 (2014): 1273–322.

Hering, David. *David Foster Wallace*: *Fiction and Form*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017.

Hochschild, Arlie R. *The Managed Heart*: *Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983.

Holliday, John. "Emotional Intimacy in Literature." *The British Journal of Aesthetics* (2017).

Illouz, Eva. *Saving the Modern Soul: Therapy, Emotions, and the Culture of Self-Help*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008.

Kelly, Adam. "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction." *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*. Ed. David Hering. Los Angeles and Austin: Sideshow Media Group Press, op. 2010. 131–46.

———. "The New Sincerity." *Postmodern/Postwar and After: Rethinking American Literature*. Ed. Jason Gladstone, Andrew Hoberek, Daniel Worden and Samuel Cohen. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2016. 197–208.

Konstantinou, Lee. *Cool Characters*: *Irony and American Fiction*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016.
Letzler, David. *The Cruft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017.
Lipsky, David. *Although of course you end up becoming Yourself: A Road Trip with David Foster Wallace*. New York: Penguin Random House, 2010.
Max, Daniel T. *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace*. New York: Viking, 2012.
McCaffery, Larry. "An interview with David Foster Wallace." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13 (1993): 127–50.
McGurl, Mark. "Real/Quality." *Time: A Vocabulary of the Present*. Ed. Joel Burges and Amy J. Elias. New York: New York University Press, 2016. 209–22.
Mills, C. Wright. *White Collar*: *The American Middle Classes*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1952.
Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories*: *Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2015.
OED Online. *quality time, n*. December 2019. ‹oed.com/view/Entry/155878›. Accessed 10 January 2020.
Reckwitz, Andreas. *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten: Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017.
Severs, Jeffrey. *David Foster Wallace's Balancing Books*: *Fictions of Value*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.
Shapiro, Stephen. "From capitalist to communist abstraction: *The Pale King's* cultural fix." *Textual Practice* 28 (2014): 1249–71.
Sinykin, Dan N. "The Conglomerate Era: Publishing, Authorship, and Literary Form, 1965–2007." *Contemporary Literature* 58 (2018): 462–91.
Styhre, Alexander. "What David Foster Wallace Can Teach Management Scholars." *Academy of Management Review* 41 (2016): 170–83.
Taranto, Julius. *On Outgrowing David Foster Wallace*. 15 September 2018. ‹https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/on-outgrowing-david-foster-wallace/›. Accessed 19 September 2020.
Timmer, Nicoline. *Do You Feel It Too?: The Post-Postmodern Syndrome in American Fiction at the Turn of the Millennium*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2010.
Trilling, Lionel. *Sincerity and Authenticity*. 1972. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
van Alphen, Ernst, Mieke Bal and C. E. Smith, eds. *The Rhetoric of Sincerity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

Wallace, David Foster. *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion about Living a Compassionate Life*. New York: Little, Brown, 2009.

———. *The Pale King*: *An Unfinished Novel*. 2011. London: Penguin, 2012.

Wren, Daniel A. and Arthur G. Bedeian. *The Evolution of Management Thought*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 1972.